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MARIA

MARIA

BY

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MARIA.

CHAPTER I.

IT was a brave April day—a day for high adventure. To be at Hyde Park Corner on such a morning was in itself a sensation, but to young Lurty Drello the flutter of delicate green that seemed to have alighted for a moment on the trees in the Park, the sun which shone as if it had never shone before, and the clean bright blue of the sky, were all things secondary in importance and vitality to the momentous nature of his journey that day to Fleet Street.

He was taking to the illustrious home, in Fleet Street, of the *Daily Orb*, the corrected proofs of his first accepted story. And to celebrate this event, it seemed to the youth, the first real spring day had come.

He sat on top of a bus, his rolled-up galley-proofs held so that they could, he hoped, not possibly be mistaken, by any observer, for mere dull business papers.

Unfortunately, there seemed to be no observers, and this was rather bitter.

MARIA

An old lady, obviously wishing she had not worn her black velvet cloak on such a warm morning, sat across the aisle; a district messenger boy, bearing a large bunch of pink and white lilac, to which was attached a note in a blue envelope, occupied the front seat, from which post he enlivened the journey by whistling a waltz in a way melodious enough to cause the fact that nature was doing her best rapidly to fill the gap that enabled him to do it, to be a source of regret to people who enjoy the piping of blackbirds.

Drello, a short, stout young man of twenty-four, gazed at these people, and their as unappreciative neighbors, with a face and expression of disgust, and taking a corpulent stylographic pen from his pocket, gave himself up to the joys of once more reading the story which was to be the beginning of his fame. His own foreign travels up to that period consisted of a dash to Paris, viâ Boulogne, on which expedition he was absent from home only seventy-three hours; and what its organizer poetically called "A Week in Tulipland," on which occasion Mr. Drello had been whisked from Amsterdam to Rotterdam and thence to several cities and towns which he henceforth humorously characterized as Otherdams.

Yet the feuilleton, the first instalment of which he was now for the fourth time anxiously correcting, was concerned with the adventures of a maiden in a mountainous part of the United States, as its title—"A Daughter of the Sierras"—announced.

It is to be feared that Bret Harte was responsible

for the idea of the tale, and that not even yet appreciated master of the English language might have questioned young Drello's honesty had he been seated in spirit in the vacant seat beside the youth.

Yet Drello was innocent because he sincerely believed that the story, in its environment of canyon and snow-capped mountains, was his own.

Meantime the lumbering vehicle made its ponderous way up Piccadilly, and Lurty Drello dreamed his little dream, his commonplace face shining with the joy of a hope realized.

He was adding a comma to an already overworked sentence, when the conductor's voice reached him: "It's no good, sir. I cawn't change it. And wot's more, the Rules of the Company——" In delicate, arresting contrast came another voice: "But that is absurd! I tell you I have no change. And"—a laugh interrupted the phrase—"I assure you the sovereign is a good one!"

Drello turned and saw the conductor's angry, red face, and another.

The other possessed, besides the usual features, a quality that the author of "A Daughter of the Sierras" felt, but could give no name to.

"I'm not saying the sovereign ain't all right," the conductor insisted. "I'm only saying that I can't change it, and that if you can't give me tuppence you'll jolly well 'ave to get off this 'ere bus. SEE?"

The young man he was addressing turned suddenly to Drello.

"I say," he exclaimed, "lend me tuppence, will you?"

He laughed and his very blue eyes crinkled at the corners in a charming way.

Lurty produced the desired coppers and placed them on the palm of an immaculately gloved hand that the other held out to him.

"Thanks so much."

When the conductor had departed, growling his aftermath of displeasure, the elder young man went on easily: "I say—I've been eavesdropping. Awfully jolly story, that looks! Did you write it?"

"Ye-es. Not up to much, but it's the thin edge of the wedge. The market—for fiction—is fearfully overstocked nowadays, you know."

The young man of the sovereign again smiled his dazzling smile.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about literature. I say," he broke off, looking at a bit of the paper that the conductor had given him. "What's this for?"

"That's the receipt—have you never been on a bus before?"

Drello's question was put in a spirit of rather clumsy satire, but the other man answered it in perfectly good faith.

"No," he said, "I never have."

Drello looked at him. He wore gray flannels of a cut Drello had never even seen, the stuff clinging to his well-knit and muscular figure. In his black tie was a pin of sapphires and diamonds and his cuffs were linked with small ovals of sapphire blue enamel, edged with little sapphires. When Drello's eyes, after their rapid travel, met those of the wearer of those unobtrusive

articles, the grouping of which accomplished such a perfected whole, the blue eyes were again half closed in the kind of mirth that, to the other young man, held much that was perplexing and, in an inexplicable way, new.

"I suppose," the stranger said, opening a very flat gold cigarette-case and carefully hiding with his thumb something in the empty half; while he offered a cigarette, "you can't quite realize that to me all this is a kind of—adventure?"

"Adventure?"

"Yes. The first Spring day—smell those lilacs! Surely they are being sent by some lover to his lady! Absolutely nothing to do, and—I meet you, possibly the Meredith of the future"—his gentle smile was again playing about his lips, as he paused to light his cigarette.

"No Meredith for me, thanks," Lurty returned with scorn. "Simplicity is the style I admire."

"I see."

The gray-clad stranger rose and sat down by the repudiator of Meredith. "You admire simplicity of style. But—don't you like ideas?"

"Of course I do. No one can write who hasn't ideas. But I like 'em expressed easily. Poor Meredith's machinery creaks too much for me."

There was a pause. The top-heavy vehicle was now swinging past the insulated churches in the Strand; in a moment Drello would have reached his goal.

Rolling up his proofs, he secured them with the elas-

tic band which had made a red line round his ungloved wrist, and took up his umbrella.

"I get out at Fleet Street," he said, with a recrudescence of his self-confidence that had seemed to be slipping from him.

The other man beamed at him and then suddenly laid on Drello's arm his own gray-gloved hand. In his face was a kind of whimsical entreaty.

"I say," he said quickly, "you are going to a big newspaper office! Be a good chap and take me with you."

"But——"

"There isn't any 'but.' I have nothing to do the whole day—I—can't you feel it in the air, the need for Adventure?"

Lurty Drello eyed him with conscious shrewdness.

"Where does the adventure come in?" he asked. "Nothing very romantic in a newspaper office! To an outsider, I mean to say," he added hastily. "You don't write, do you?"

The other shook his head. "No. But—who knows whether I couldn't if I tried, as the man said about playing the fiddle! Come, do take me with you!"

The bus had stopped and Drello, whose suspicions were now aroused, turned down the slippery steps, landed in the mud with a splash, and an expletive, only to find as he reached the curb that the man in gray had followed him.

"My word, you are a wonderful fellow," the man in gray observed.

Catching Lurty's eye, "I nearly broke my neck fol-

lowing you. After that, you know, you can't possibly desert me."

"All right, come along. But—I haven't time to show you over the place. I—I am lunching at one."

The other man shook his head. "No—you will lunch with me. We will have—mutton chops and boiled potatoes and—porter!"

He looked seriously delighted over the prospect of these viands, but Drello laughed. "Pooh! That isn't what I'm going to have. As a matter of fact, I have two ladies lunching with me." As he spoke a brownish flush came up under his thick skin and his mouth stretched in a nervous smile.

"Ladies!" The blue eyes were dancing now in a curious excitement. "Beautiful ladies?"

"One of them is. The other is—her mother."

"I see. I suppose," the older man went on, sympathetically but still with the, to Drello, inexplicable personal interest in his voice, "that I see? A—a love story?"

Drello was half annoyed, half flattered. "You are a queer chap," he muttered awkwardly, "and—well, here we are at the shop. Do you really care to come in? I shall only have time for a wash and brush up when I've turned in my stuff, but"—he showed here a touch of pride under a nonchalant exterior—"I can introduce you to a sub-editor who is rather a friend of mine."

The man in gray expressed his delight at this unusual bit of luck, and the two made their way up the dingy stairs.

As the two young men made their way down th stairs, Drello's reflections crystallized into a sudde idea.

"I say," he burst out, "you tell me you've nothin much to do to-day—well, why not come and lunc with me and my party? I've discovered a rather jolly little restaurant—French—good fodder—do come."

The other man glanced at him with a kind of sharpness.

"You are very kind," he ventured dryly, "but I mustn't."

"But why not?" Drello's face evidently held something reassuring to the other.

"Well, in the first place, Mr. Drello, you don't even know my name. Suppose, after lunch, I propose an adjournment to my rooms, and a little game of chemin-de-fer?"

"What's that?"

"Well—baccarat, poker—any card game. Would you come?"

Drello drew back. "No, I wouldn't," he said bluntly; "I don't gamble. And what's more," he added with sudden conviction, "I don't believe you do!"

The man in gray laughed. "I wish I didn't," he said, "but I do. However, that isn't the point. You have been kind to me, so here's a piece of advice in return. Never invite to meet ladies men whom you don't know."

Lurty Drello flushed.

"Nonsense," he blustered, boyishly, "I don't know your name, but I can see that—that you are all right."

The elder man stood still, holding up his thin bamboo stick with a little jade top to attract a passing taxi.

"And how," he asked, seeming many years older than Drello, "can you tell that?"

"By—by—well, I don't know how, but I can."

"Thanks. And good-bye."

They shook hands, but before they released their grip Drello broke out again. "I say—do come, Doris—Miss Leate will be sure to like you, and as to your name—well, what is it?"

The taxi had drawn up to the curb and the driver, his coat embellished with a daffodil, opened the door.

"My name," the man in gray said slowly, "is Frederick with a K."

"Right ho! Then come along," retorted Lurty, pushing him almost affectionately toward the cab, "and meet—well, yes, I *will* tell you—the future Mrs. Drello."

The future Mrs. Drello and her mother were waiting in the crowded little foyer of the restaurant when the two young men arrived.

Mrs. Leate, a pretty old woman in rather old-fashioned clothes, shook hands kindly with them both.

"I am glad to meet any friend of Lurty's," she said.

Miss Leate's well-trained dark eyes turned their flashlight over the strange craft in her waters, and then ran up her friendliest pennons of glance and smile. She was a thin, slight girl with a radiant skin

of white and crimson and a great deal of artfully untidy brown hair.

"Lurty, you wretch," she cried in prettily feigned anger, "it's twenty past one, and we have stalls for Hawtrey's play! We must gorge and fly!"

Lurty beamed at her. "Imagine you gorging," he protested adoringly. "Come along, I've engaged a table."

The little party threaded its way among the close-set tables to one near an open window giving onto a tiny courtyard cunningly decked with plants in pots. "This is my favorite corner," Drello declared, as they sat down.

Mr. Frederick glanced at him with a certain benevolence, as if the youth's innocent boasting pleased him rather than otherwise.

"Are you an old friend of Lurty's?" Miss Leate was asking him. "If you are, I think it was very unkind of him never to introduce you before!"

He bent his head, so sleekly brushed that it looked as though the hairs were attached to the skull the whole of their length with some highly superior varnish.

"You flatter me," he murmured.

Her eyes narrowed a little as she watched him, and she frowned when a remark from Lurty drew her attention away from the stranger.

Old Mrs. Leate was hungry and ate her lunch with only a conventional regard for the social side of the occasion. A meal was to her, one saw, an opportunity of nourishment. And of nourishment she partook.

Lurty was too much enthralled by Doris to be very hungry, and Doris's restless attention clearly hovered about Mr. Frederick.

"Have you two been friends for a long time?" she insisted finally.

Lurty, whose independent artist soul found expression in a certain conscientious bullying of the alien slaves who bore them their food, stirred uneasily in his chair.

"N—not very long," he said. "Have some more cucumbers, Doris."

"No, thanks. But"—her glossy dark eyes darted a quick glance from one man to the other, "you aren't a bit alike! I never should have thought you'd have been friends."

Mr. Frederick leaned toward her.

"Lurty and I," he said in a queer little detached way, "have not known each other very long, but we are bound together by a close tie."

"Yes?" she urged curiously, the carmine in her cheeks deepening. "What is the tie?"

"This," Frederick returned with immense gravity. "I owe him money."

Drello burst into boyish, roaring laughter, and Mrs. Leate looked up mildly from her plate.

"I do like to hear young people laugh," she observed.

Drello was about to tell the story of the famous tuppence when Frederick silenced him with a gesture.

"If," he continued to the girl, whose mouth had straightened into a narrow red line, "you really must

know the circumstances of Drello's acquaintance with me, here is my version. Drello and I had not met—since we were at school—until to-day, when chance brought us together on—a bus."

Clearly she did not enjoy the idea of the bus, and, as clearly, Mr. Frederick did. With quiet insistence he went on.

"No one," he said, "has, so far as I know, written about the bus in the way it deserves. It is the elephant of passenger traffic (the taxi being the fleet Arab, the van the patient camel, etc., etc.); but the vast, obedient motor bus is the elephant, and the driver is its very experienced mahout.

"To continue," he went on with a slightly malicious smile at Miss Leate—"for I see that my fantasy interests you—there I sat on the howdah, to-day, riding in the excitement of the chase further and further into the jungle——"

"Whatever do you mean by the jungle?" she interrupted crossly.

"By the jungle I mean the City. The Cold Lairs of the lion, the tiger, the bull (wild, of course!), the bear—and the rest."

"What an awful story that was," put in Mrs. Leate with the throaty voice of repletion, "about man-eating tigers the other day. Clawing the poor blacks off their pillars and eating them alive. It's awful to think that these things happen in British territory, isn't it?"

"You ought to write a letter to the *Times* about it, mother darling," suggested her daughter, her voice

acidulated at the beginning of the sentence but developing sweetness as it went on.

"Well, dear," the old woman returned unsuspiciously, "it's a great comfort to know that the King, God bless him, shot several when he was with them at the Durbar."

"Weren't they tigers?" snapped Miss Leate.

"Let us hope," Frederick urged fancifully, "that they were lions. Man-eating lions are really such horrid things."

Mrs. Leate smiled at him as one smiles in finding an unexpected ally, but Miss Leate turned to him the cold shoulder of disapproval.

"Lurty," she cooed, "let's not wait for coffee. It's ten past two, and we ought to be going. Couldn't you drive us to the Apollo? I haven't really had a word with you."

She was gathering up her gloves and her gold and platinum chain bag as she spoke, when, to Lurty's horror, Mr. Frederick suddenly forgot his manners.

He rose, bowed absently to the ladies, shook hands still more absently with the bewildered author of "A Daughter of the Sierras," and marched across the room to a little table where two old men had just taken their places. These two old men he joined, and, when Drello and his party passed them a moment later, he did not even see them.

"The man's a cad," Miss Leate declared furiously. "How could you bring him to lunch with us?"

Lurty flushed. "You seemed to like him well enough," he blurted out, "until he left us."

But Drello's heart was one of those which retain impressions made on it. He had liked Mr. Frederick, and he was hurt at that gentleman's way of leaving them.

"Rude, beastly rude," he cogitated, when he had left the ladies at the Apollo Theater, and was making his way Piccadillywards.

"I suppose she's right, he was rude. And yet, somehow, I don't believe he's a card-sharper, or anything of that sort!"

CHAPTER III

THE Drellos, or the Drelli, as Lurty inclined facetiously to call them, occupied a roomy old house in St. Anne's Terrace, South Kensington. There was before the house a strip of garden, behind high, moss-grown brick walls, and in the garden grew several old trees, one a fine cedar, whose generous layers of shade made a cool shelter from summer heat, when there was any.

On the first Sunday in May that year this narrow slice of garden presented a very charming aspect. Some low lilac trees against the wall were hung with plumes of purple bloom, under the cedar there was a little island of shade, and on the island stood a small colony of comfortable, shabby cane chairs, a large green table covered with newspapers, books, and patience cards. And the best thing of all was in one of the low chairs.

This was a young girl in a rather old-fashioned white frock of the kind that renews its youth in the tub, not at the cleaner's.

The young girl's head was outlined brilliantly against a scarlet pillow, a large beflowered hat lay on the grass beside her, and she lay perfectly still, for she was asleep.

Anyone who could have been transported noiselessly hither would have enjoyed the sight, for Maria Drello was not only a very pretty, or even a very beautiful girl, she was A Beauty.

Her coal-black hair was of a wonderful silky quality, and though plentiful and smoothly curly, did not bulge at any given point and thus conceal the shape of the head, which was perfect.

Her smooth eyelids, edged with lashes that threw deep shadows on her cheeks, lay under very marked black eyebrows, crescent-shaped.

Her mouth was deeply indented at the corners, and the top lip sprang with a beautiful curve to the point in the middle.

Her chin, a little strong for a young girl's, was softened by a dimple, and her long white throat, round which hung an old-fashioned diamond cross on a narrow black ribbon, was beautifully molded.

Her feet stretched comfortably before her unconfined body as, easily settled in her chair, she slept in the warm, pungent shade of the old tree, while the sound of church bells filled the air, and the voices of churchgoers floated from time to time over the wall.

Old William Drello, from his chair the other side of the table, glanced at his daughter from time to time. It was plain, despite the fact that two-thirds of his face was covered with his beard, that his daughter had derived much of her beauty from him; he was a very ornamental adjunct to the garden in his baggy, putty-colored trousers and his black velveteen jacket.

His hooded eyes, under their shaggy brows, still bore

the likeness to an eagle's, celebrated by William Morris in his "Birthday Ode to W. D.," written in 1870; and anyone familiar with Watts's portraits must have recognized in him the original of the "Portrait of a Friend" exhibited in '80, and sold a year later to Mr. Beckmesser of Milwaukee. "W. D." figured, as everyone knows, more or less importantly in every biography of the great men of his time, and his time had extended well over fifty years, for he was now nearly seventy. There he sat, handsome and benign, an old-fashioned hat that he always alluded to (feeling rather like a planter, which he had never been, as he did so) as "my broad-leafed hat," on the grass beside him.

Every inch the splendid old father of romantic drama.

Presently Lurty, rather gorgeous in attire, particularly as to his hat, a brand new topper which did not quite fit, appeared in one of the open windows and stepped out on to the gravel path.

"I say, Governor," he called cheerfully, "where's Maria? She said she'd be——"

The old man waved his hand toward the sleeping girl and Lurty laughed.

"Poor dear, she was tired out last night. Sang too much, I suppose, after her bad crossing. It's all right, though; there's lots of time. Much too hot for church, but I promised Doris we'd meet her in the Park and bring her back here to lunch." He sat down in the other chair as he spoke, and lit a cigarette.

Lurty Drello was one of those men of whom fine feathers do make fine birds. Dressed as he now was,

"No, I'm not," he protested, "only you haven't seen her since—since we have been engaged—and she's awfully smart herself——"

Again she came to the window. "My dear Lurty, I couldn't be smart—in your sense—if I tried, but I haven't been seven months in Paris for nothing. Now run away and let me dress in peace."

When she came down a few minutes later Lurty stared.

"My word!" he said slowly.

"Well—am I not 'smart' enough for you?"

"Maria!"

Old W. D. had risen and stood before them, his hooded eyes glowing in the sun, a little spot of red just above the beard line in either cheek.

He was deeply moved, his thin, white old hands, with their slate-colored veins standing out like knotted cords, hung by his side.

"It—it——" he stammered, moving uncertainly toward his daughter.

"Lurty, take care of her," he went on with a sort of groan.

"But, Father, what is the matter?" she asked him in great anxiety. "What—has anything happened?"

"Yes. You—and Spring."

Lurty stared in open perplexity, but the girl put her arms gently round her father and kissed him.

"You have never quite realized," she said, "that I am grown up? Is that it?"

"More or less, my dear, more or less. You are—a magnificent creature, Maria, and"—he ruffled his white

hair with a gesture of helplessness,—"things are going to happen."

He stood close to her for a moment and then shuffled quickly into the house.

"Queer old boy, the Governor," commented Lurty kindly. "Never saw him like that before."

She did not move for a moment, but stood quite still, her beautiful young body bathed in the sunlight, her eyes half closed.

"I wish," she said slowly, "I could have known him in his youth. Sometimes I think that he is still a young man—a young man in an old man's body."

"You ought to write, my dear," Lurty returned, patronizingly; "you and your imagination!"

She did not respond to his mood; instead, her own seemed to hold her closely, as she went on more to herself than to him: "We forget that he is very old. And—and we have learned that he is very young."

"Well, young or old, you and I must be getting on, if we want to get to the Abbey!"

They found a taxi and were soon seated in a dim corner of the old church.

They were very late and a prayer was going on as they took their places.

Maria knelt and joined the prayer with the uninterested conformity to ritual common to those who neither believe nor doubt.

Drello, whose mind was one of those on whom the duty of taking notes is strongly impressed, looked round the ancient place with a reporter's eye.

The church was not full. The famous Canon was not to preach and Spring was out of doors.

Across the velvety-brown gloom cut several shafts of jeweled light; and in the penumbra only very old faces, he observed, looked other than young. Now the organ was throbbing softly, growing louder, and an anthem rose in the quiet place.

Maria, Lurty observed, was attracting much attention as she stood looking quietly before her.

A thrill of pride ran over the young man's heart.

She was indeed beautiful in her strange, sapphire-colored frock and her small hat with its springing wings—a hat rather like Mercury's cap.

"She must loathe Kensington after Paris," he reflected, "and it was a shame the Governor couldn't afford to let her have more than the six months' lessons of de Reszke. If only 'A Daughter of the Sierras' could be put into book form, and would sell thirty or forty thousand copies, by Jove, we'd send her back again."

Suddenly his dreaming eyes fell on a face in the crowd some hundred yards away; a face conspicuous for the way in which it seemed to start out of its environment as one head in a painted group often does.

It was a face full of intentness, of interest, of—Lurty could only think of the word "excitement." What on earth was the fellow looking at like that—as if he were quite alone—as if—and who on earth was he?

Then the face was abruptly turned aside, and some-

thing moved Lurty to look at Maria. She was blushing divinely, all over her face, flushing till her eyes looked wet.

"I say," Lurty whispered, "I call that cheek, that fellow. And—and—I know him, Maria!"

CHAPTER IV

AS the brother and sister left the Abbey by a side door, issuing into the almost blinding spring light, Mr. Frederick joined them.

He looked as though he had been ill, Lurty thought; he was pale and his mouth looked a little drawn.

"How do you do, Drello?"

"How are you?" Lurty growled, a surly note in his voice; he had been annoyed by the way Frederick had stared at his sister.

But apparently his voice was less surly than he fancied, for neither Maria nor the culprit seemed to notice it.

"I nearly stared my eyes out of my head in the Abbey," Frederick went on easily, "trying to see if it was really you."

"Oh, yes, it's me, all right."

"Won't you introduce me to your sister?"

Again a dull impulse of anger stirred Lurty's nerves, but he accomplished the introduction as if in spite of himself, and Frederick held out his hand to the girl.

She looked up at him swiftly, then dropped her eyes and withdrew her hand.

"May I walk part of the way with you," Frederick asked, "on my way to a very dull lunch party?"

"Yes," she answered swiftly, and the trio made its way toward Birdcage Walk.

Lurty, as he listened to the rather jerky conversation of the other two, studied the aspect of his friend with interest.

Whoever he was, the fellow certainly knew how to dress! Lurty had never seen coats fit as his did, and his imagination was fired by a glimpse he got of mauve socks above Frederick's patent shoes.

"Not the same pair as the other day, either," he thought. At the same time, Frederick was not in good form that morning. His remarks were halting, one could almost have said shy, and he rarely if ever turned his face toward Maria, who sailed on over the damp stones with the delicate yet vigorous grace peculiar to her, her dark eyes gazing straight before her.

Lurty, among whose faults did not exist that very ugly one, envy, watched them with growing admiration. They certainly were a fine-looking pair; he didn't wonder when a little old woman stopped short as they passed and gazed with open curiosity at their two high-held young heads.

"She'll know you again," he exclaimed, his good humor coming back under the influence of the sun and the flaunting flowers everywhere about.

"The old lady evidently admired your sister, Drello," Frederick returned, with a little frown.

Maria looked at him, two stars of sunlight in her beautiful serious eyes. "I thought she seemed to know you," she said.

"Oh, no—I think not. I don't think I ever saw her before," he answered, gazing at her.

"Miss Drello, I find I must get back, or I shall be late—I hope you will allow me to come and see you."

At that moment a taxi passed them, going in their direction at the crawl prescribed, presumably for the safety of the inhabitants of the ugliest royal palace in the world, and, when it had got a few yards ahead, it came to a stop, and a rather shrill voice broke into the comparative quiet that seems to brood over low-voiced speakers.

"Lurty! Lurty!"

It was Doris Leate and her mother.

Lurty sped to the cab and, while explanations ensued which resulted in the descent to earth of the two ladies, Maria Drello found herself alone with Frederick.

He turned his back to the taxi and looked at her with eyes whose blueness seemed to increase as he gazed.

"Have you forgiven me?"

"For—for what?"

She stammered for the first time in her life; her lips were stiff, as if with extreme cold.

"For—for staring as I did in church. You must forgive me, for I could not help it."

She did not reply, but she met his bold eyes for a moment.

"Of course I forgive you; if there's anything to forgive."

"Thank you. And I will come to see you to-morrow at five."

Before she could answer Doris Leate, extremely pretty in pink from head to foot, danced up to him. "Oh, Mr. Frederick, how do you do?"

He bowed stiffly, and the blueness of his eyes seemed to fade to gray as the eyelids half covered them. "Aren't you coming to Church Parade with us?" she continued; "Oh, do come—I don't know whether you live much in town—you don't look altogether English—but, if you've never seen Church Parade, you ought to! All the pretty girls in Society or out are there—and all the smart men."

"Come along, let's start."

Lurty watched her consciously arched face with admiration, but Maria drew away from the little vulgar creature and joined old Mrs. Leate, who, very fine in a new gray gown and bespangled bonnet, was talking to Lurty.

"I wouldn't throw a hammer myself for worlds," she declared; "why, just think if they hit somebody! But I do think they are brave women."

Maria smiled. "Oh, certainly, very brave," she echoed, but she also heard and saw Frederick.

"Thanks," he was saying to the fluttering supplicating Doris. "I am on my way to lunch at the—at the Ritz—good-bye. Ah, Mrs. Leate"—he shook hands with the old lady, who asked him if the spring air made him tired, as it did her, grasped Lurty's hand, and, with another bow to Doris, turned to Maria.

"Good-bye, Miss Drello," he said. He held her

hand, apparently, for no longer a time than he had those of the other two women, nor had his eyes really rested on hers for hours, for even the alert and vixenish Doris made no remarks about his manner, but to Maria it seemed certain that these things had been done.

"Well, Maria, my dear," Miss Leate broke out, as the little party got under way, "so here you are back in little old London again."

"Yes," the taller girl said gravely.

"And Lurty tells me you aren't going back?"

"No. Father can't afford to let me."

"What a pity—Oh, there's Lady Vi Rollaston in that motor; rather a dear, what? Tell me, is the great Jean half so fascinating as they say?"

"M. de Reszké is a wonderful teacher, and very kind," Maria answered, with an effort. "I never noticed whether he was fascinating."

"Là, là! well, now, tell me all about your wonderful Mr. Fredericks. I know a man who knows some Fredericks in Dorset. Does he belong to them?"

"He isn't my Mr. Fredericks, or Mr. Fredericks at all," the girl forced herself to say quietly. "He's a friend of Lurty's and his name is—Frederick, isn't it, Lurty?"

Lurty nodded. "Yes. I wish you hadn't said he might call, Maria. I really know nothing about him."

Doris pouted. "I like that, when you thought him good enough to lunch with Mum and me."

Lurty cleared his throat. "That's different, in a restaurant. But I always think," he went on, regaining his self-confidence, that always seemed to ooze from

him in Frederick's presence, "I always think that a fellow ought not to introduce to his women friends men about whom he knows—about whom—he knows as little as I do about Frederick."

Somehow this quotation from the very man against whom he used it, relieved young Drello's mind, and, with a blithe, "Oh, well, you can be out when he calls," he marched on ahead with the lady of his heart, leaving Maria and Mrs. Leate to follow at the pace dictated by the old lady's Sunday tightness of stays and boots.

CHAPTER V

A LITTLE after half past four the next afternoon old William Drello came out of the room which for twenty-five years had been honored by the courtesy title of his study, and, taking from the old-fashioned mahogany hatrack his broad-leafed hat, he picked up his stick (one given him many years before by Tennyson) and started for the door. As he passed the drawing-room he glanced in, and what he saw arrested him on the threshold.

It was a long, low room, carpeted throughout with an old green carpet. Lace curtains hung at the three windows, which this afternoon let in but the faint light of a fitfully rainy day. The walls were covered with a yellowish white paper and adorned with a series of Seymour Haden's chaste etchings, an engraving of Watts's "Hope," and an original sketch of the river from the Chelsea Embankment, by Whistler.

Over the ornamentally fretworked mantelpiece there hung a time-yellowed photograph of the Sistine Madonna.

Old W. D., of course, knew every aspect, every expression of the room, but he was keenly open to impression, and so there he stood, his stick under his arm, his hat on his handsome old head.

In a low crewel-work chair by the fern-filled grate sat his daughter, her hands on her lap, gazing straight before her. Her face her father's sharp eyes could see in a large Chippendale mirror hanging to the right of the fireplace.

On the round center table the books were shoved to one side, and on a spread out newspaper lay a great bunch of daffodils, another of narcissi. It seemed to the old man a very long time that he stood there watching his motionless daughter. He had time to see that on the floor by the table stood a brass water-can full of water, and that on a little work-table was marshaled an array of empty jugs and vases.

He had time to see that a red-and-white duster lay on the hearth-rug, and that the glass door of an old-fashioned cabinet was open and that a Chinese teapot, the chief ornament of its modest collection, had been taken from the middle shelf and stood on a chair near the sofa.

"Maria!"

His deep, old voice sounded very loud in the silence of the house. The girl started violently and rose. "Yes, Father; did you want me?"

"No, my dear, no. But I think," he added, coming toward her, "that I want you to be nearer to me than you were just now."

She flushed, the splendid, easy-coming, easy-ebbing crimson that made her face like the sky.

"I am sorry—Father. I was going to set up the flowers, and—I don't quite know—I seem to have gone wool gathering."

She took up a bunch of daffodils and separated them briskly. "Are you going out? I fear it's going to rain."

"It rains, and stops, and rains again, all day," he returned; "besides, I have my trusty umbrella."

"No, you haven't, you have your trusty stick, and that won't keep you dry."

They both burst out laughing at his absence of mind, and she went on with her work.

He watched her deft fingers for several seconds in silence and then he spoke:

"Maria, my dear—are you fretting about Paris?"

"No, Father; oh, no. It was so good of you to let me have the six months, I should be the most ungrateful girl alive if——"

"I know, I know, but—ever since yesterday—I noticed it at lunch—you have been thinking about something. Couldn't you—couldn't you tell me what it is?"

His bold, magnificent old face was touched by a kind of wistful softness. She had known for many years that his mental powers were not in any kind of proportion to the promise of his face, but she had rarely seen in him this wistful kindness, and it moved her.

She looked at him, the sheaf of narcissi she was unfastening making a great white splash against the dark blue pinafore she had put on to protect her gown.

"Have I been thinking about something, Father? Well, believe me, it has nothing to do with Paris." His face cleared instantly and he began to draw on his old wash-leather gloves.

"Then that's all right, my dear!"

She did not move.

"Father," she said slowly, "I have been thinking about something, and—perhaps you can help me——"

As she spoke the door bell rang loudly, and she gave a hasty look at the clock.

"Surely it can't be five?"

"Yes, my dear, it is. This clock is very slow of late. Dear me," he continued, looking out of the window as the garden door opened, "who is this young man? He looks—very—very happy!"

Maria's eyes followed his.

"Oh, let me go upstairs, Father, dear," she said, tearing at her apron strings. "It's a friend of Lurty's who is coming to see me."

Old Drello chuckled musically. "A friend of Lurty's coming to see you! Well, my dear, I must say I don't blame him. You'll have to run!"

But she was coming back to her flowers.

"There is no shame in arranging flowers," she declared slowly, "nor in wearing an apron. I was a fool."

When Thimblebee, the old factotum who had looked after the Drellos since they were babies, announced Mr. Frederick, Maria turned quietly to him.

"How do you do," she said, "I can't shake hands with you because, as you see, my hands are wet. Father, let me introduce a friend of Lurty's—Mr. Frederick."

The old man held out his hand and made the young one welcome to his house.

"Lurty will be very sorry to miss you," he said

kindly, "but, as you probably know, he is doing some secretary work for Sir John Lacton."

"Is he, indeed? No, I didn't know. Lacton must be a wonderful old fellow," Frederick added, with unfeigned interest. "Does he still paint?"

"No; his sight is almost quite gone. His day is done."

"I own a sketch of his—in fact, a little portrait of my grandmother," the young man went on, evidently a little embarrassed.

"Indeed. Then you own a great treasure." Old W. D. bowed benignly. "I have known Jack Lacton for forty years, and he remains, and always will remain, one of the giants."

"Did you enjoy Church Parade, Miss Drello?"

She started at the abruptness of his change of subject; it seemed at first almost like discourtesy to her father, but a swift glance at his face assured that no such breach of manners was intended.

"Yes—no. I don't like crowds," she answered confusedly.

"Ah! Then you don't care for balls, and big dinners—parties, and such things."

"No. I hate them."

He looked much pleased by this, and went on eagerly: "So do I. The number of hours one wastes going to places when one is sure to be bored is appalling."

Old Drello smiled as if he were amused.

"You won't mind an old man's saying that, for an anchorite, you present a rather worldly appearance?"

Frederick made a queer little movement like one of

quick displeasure, and then answered with a half deprecating glance at his dark blue clothes, "Oh, well, one must be covered!"

After which he again turned to the girl.

"You like flowers? I am sure you do by the way you touch them. I, too, love them. I own a little cottage in Devonshire—very small it is, but the garden is quite wonderful. I should like to show it to you."

"Thanks. We never go to Devonshire, it is too long a journey for my father."

There was a pause, and then old Drello said, taking a narcissus and drawing it through his buttonhole, "Well, I will now go for my walk. Get off that hideous bib thing, my dear, and give—ah—Frederick some tea. Good afternoon."

They watched his tall bent figure in its slow progress down the flagged path to the gate, they listened to the slamming of the gate.

Then Frederick said, taking both her hands in his: "Is your name really and truly Maria?"

"Yes."

For some reason, possibly because at that instant the lazy sun came into the room and made a lake of light for the daffodils to float on, they both laughed and she drew her hands away.

"Father named us all out of plays. I was Maria out of *The School for Scandal*, and Lurty goes without saying, and we had a brother named Sebastian, and a sister, who died when she was a baby, called Portia!"

"Had you really! It is strange about Maria,

though," he went on, "because that is my mother name."

She was seized with a desire to know his name.

"And—you?" she asked shyly.

"I? How do you mean? Oh, I see. Mine is horric preposterous. It begins with an A, but I won't tell to you yet."

"All right. Will you ring the bell and we'll ha tea."

The oppression and almost misery of the previo day had vanished for him, apparently, as well as f her. They ate their toast and little cakes and dra their tea as if they had known each other all the lives.

She told him of her life in Paris, of the tiny flat s shared with two old Frenchwomen, of the great m her master, and her lessons, of her walks with Mad moiselle Barbe in the afternoons, of the Seine, and i curious unlikeness to the Thames, of the little resta rant where sometimes the old lady took her for a gre treat.

"And now you have come here to stay?"

Her face fell. "Yes. My father cannot afford let me stay any longer. He is not rich."

"But—you will go on singing?"

She nodded gently. "Yes, I wish, you see, to be professional. I study music seriously."

"Don't!" he cried with a laugh. "Study it joyous Let it express—the happiness of—your beauti youth."

The charm was broken. Her crescent-shaped e

brows drew nervously together for a moment, her red lips contracted.

"Youth is beautiful, of course," she generalized, "but——"

He rose. "Miss Drello—not all youth is, but—yours must be. You—you are so beautiful yourself—I—surely, you know that? You must be happy." After a short pause he added savagely: "You shall be happy."

"Oh!" She ran toward the window. "Look at the rain! Oh, dear, he will catch his death. Look, is a big horn-handled umbrella there in the rack?"

Obeying her, he went into the hall and came back with the umbrella in his hand. "Here it is."

"Oh, Mr. Frederick, I wonder if you would be so kind—I don' t dare send poor old Thimblebee, she is so asthmatic—would you very much mind taking the umbrella to my father? He will be in the square, only two minutes up the street to your right——"

He frowned.

"Miss Drello——"

"I shall be so obliged to you," she persisted and he gave way.

"Very well. I will go. And will you," seizing her cold hand, and pressing it hurriedly to his lips, "will you try to understand that there is nothing I would not do for you?"

She grew very white. "Thank you," she said simply, "please hurry."

Frederick rushed out into the rain, found the old

man huddled quite comfortably under a tree, and brought him home.

"Miss M'ria," the handmaiden told him, as she opened the door, "Miss M'ria says I am to dry your shoes, sir, and your coat."

"Where is Miss Maria?"

"Oh, well, sir, her head's worse, and she's gone to bed, with her compliments—and you're to put on one of Mr. Lurty's coats while yours dries."

CHAPTER VI

WHEN, at about four o'clock the next day, Maria Drello reached No. 3, All Saints Place, in Chelsea, it was raining; a gentle Spring rain, under which the lilacs in the little garden of No. 3 seemed almost visibly to be unfolding their leaves.

Her hand on the iron gate, Maria stood for a moment looking at the house with a queer feeling that she saw it for the first time.

It was an ugly brick house with narrow windows and a terra cotta bas-relief over the door. Maria recalled, with sudden, vivid memory, the day of her first visit to it; how her hands had trembled as she opened the gate; how her voice had trembled as she told the maid her name. And then—unconscious of the rain, she stood there under her dripping umbrella, visualizing her first glimpse of the great Wilhelm Sulzer.

She had imagined him to be a thin, tall, iron-gray man, and she found him an enormously fat old fellow, with a portentous double chin. He was seated in a great, cavernous armchair from which he did not rise, and, as he shook hands with her, she saw that his fingers were like five red sausages about to burst their skins.

It had been winter that day, and the shabby room, which always looked very dusty, was already lighted by the flaring, unshaded gas that the great man liked.

Maria had taken off her gloves and stood with the glare of the gas full on her. Even now she could remember how it hurt her eyes. And then Sulzer had said in his oily guttural voice, "Ach, you say you can sing me 'Widmung'? If you can sing 'Widmung' properly you have no need to come to me! Howeffer—*Tomsk!*"

Maria had turned nervously, and there in the rain, nearly four years later, she gave a little shudder at the thought of her first sight of Sulzer's accompanist. She had forgotten her horror, however, when Tomsk began to play; forgotten as much through the beauty and charm of his accompaniment as through her own nervousness. . . .

Sulzer had burst out laughing at her singing, stigmatizing it as horrible, as absurd, above all, as English. That was always his culminating insult to any musician, to accuse him or her of being English.

But, when his rough, boisterous mirth had died away, he had consented to give her lessons, and she had gone home happy.

It all came back to her, that April afternoon in the rain, came back so clearly that she stood on by the gate staring dreamily at the house, until the door was opened with great abruptness, and a girl came out on the steps.

"Oh, Maria," the girl cried, "it *is* you!"

"Of course it is, dear. How are you?"

They met in the middle of the wet gravel path, kissed,

closed the umbrella, and went together into the house.

"You ridiculous being, to stand there in the rain," the other girl said with no scorn in her voice, in spite of her words. "I just happened to look out of the window, and—there you were!"

Maria followed her into the drawing-room, laughing softly.

"I was wondering," she answered, "whether he will roar with laughter *this* time when I sing for him!"

"Probably. Two new ones went away crying yesterday. Besides, he *hated* your going to Paris, you know."

The room was narrow, and choked with ugly furniture. The walls were almost covered with bad paintings in gilt frames; there was a Parian marble statue of a girl in modern bathing dress about to dive off a rock; there was a case of stuffed birds, two vases filled with artificial roses, a wax cross covered with ivy leaves well sprinkled with flakes of mica, and everywhere laid primly on the half dozen dissimilar and hideous tables, there were books; books of the nearly extinct kind with highly gilt leaves that look as if they not only never were, but never could be opened.

It was a dreadful room, but Maria Drello did not notice its horror, she was so used to it; whereas Barbara Gryce, old Sulzer's niece, considered it a rather splendid apartment.

The two girls had not met since Maria's return, and, as they sat waiting, little Barbara listened with the deepest interest to her friend's bald account of her doings in Paris.

"Do you like his way of teaching better than you like Uncle Wilhelm's?" she asked.

"N-no; only you know how—how Herr Sulzer despairs about my voice——"

Barbara shook her head wisely. "Not about your *voice*, darling. It's—it's something in—in *you*. Neither your voice nor your production. Even he can't explain it, so, of course, I can't, but——"

She was a little slim thing with bright blue eyes that had an infinite capacity for adoration. She was not pretty, or, to most people, attractive, so that Maria Drello's affection for her was her greatest happiness, and her whole romance was centered in Maria's beauty.

"He said the other day, when I told him you were coming to sing for him," she went on, "shall I tell you?"

"Yes." Sulzer's opinion was of great value, and Maria's beautiful face was grave as she spoke.

"He said: 'God grant she has fallen in love—and, if it's with the wrong man, so much the better.' "

The little creature's imitation of the fat, trumpet-voiced old man was very funny, but Maria did not laugh. She blushed furiously and for a moment pressed her hands close together.

"Oh, Barba," she said helplessly.

At that moment the sound of a sharply struck bell interrupted them and, without even a look at her friend, Barbara darted from the room. A minute or two later Maria stood before the great master, the memory of her first visit once more vibrating in her mind.

Nothing in the room was changed. The same crude

light hurt her eyes, the same fat, red hand shook hers, the same bald head gleamed in the gloom of the high-backed easy chair.

Over the piano on its heavy black bracket still hung Rodin's tribute to his German friend—a beautiful, rough-hewn head of Beethoven.

"S-so, you are back."

"Yes."

She could not see the old man's face. As usual, he sat in the deep recesses of his chair, in a kind of cave, out of which his voice issued with a certain mystery.

"Hof you learned to sing, with your Pole?"

"I have tried, Herr Sulzer."

"*Huh!* Well—has anyone died? Or have you lost your money so that you must work very hard for your bread? Or have you had smallpox and lost your beauty?"

She was used to the workings of his mind, and waited quietly until he ceased speaking. Then she answered: "You will be sorry to hear that nothing dreadful has happened to me. That I am very happy."

"*Huh!* I am sorry. As you want to sing—*really* to sing—only trouble could make you. A great grief, or —a great happiness—or, lieber Gott in Himmel, I wonder what could make you!"

He was silent for a moment and then he said abruptly: "Frühlingsnacht *Tomsk!*"

On the far side of the piano, near the wall, stood a low red and black screen, of ugly and commonplace design.

At the old man's bidding from behind the screen came Tomsk.

At first sight a stranger would have thought that he was kneeling, for his fine big head barely reached the music-rack.

But suddenly, as he caught at the keyboard with his large, beautifully shaped, white hands, swinging himself up to the piano stool, one saw that, while his body was as big as most men's, his legs were abnormally, hideously short. Maria nodded to him when he was firmly established on the stool, not before, for she knew that he preferred to be disregarded until he had attained what seemed to him to be his throne.

He acknowledged her greeting with a low bow, and, without a word, began to play. The girl stood in the gaslight, her hands lightly locked, and sang to her invisible audience and critic.

She was extremely nervous and her beautiful soft voice shook at first, but suddenly it changed, steadied and strengthened.

"I am singing for—for *him*," she told herself—"for Mr. Frederick!"

At the end of the song the voice from the easy chair said shortly: "*Again!*"

Again she sang the beautiful song.

When she had finished the dwarf slid to the floor and disappeared behind his screen into the obscurity his sick soul loved.

There was a long pause, at the end of which Sulzer said slowly: "S-s—. *Also*—far better. He knows a good deal, after all. You have improved."

"I—am glad," she returned, a little break in her voice. "Do you think, then, that—that I shall be good?"

"H'm. Good—that is saying much. You are far from good now. Better, yes; good, no. Your voice is very beautiful."

He spoke without enthusiasm, without grudging. This, his faculty for absolutely fair criticism, was one of the qualities that had made him what he was.

"But—only my voice?"

"Your voice is very beautiful, but—you are much improved, technically. It is now a very good production, but——"

In the silence Tomsk blew his nose loudly.

"But——"

"It is this, Miss Drello: You are too even; too cold; too—dry. You are young, you are, *ach, du Allmächtiger!*—beautiful. But these things alone never yet made an artist. I am sorry."

She knew that he was speaking the truth; that he was sorry. Her eyes filled slowly with tears. "Cannot you tell me," she asked, "what it is that—I lack?"

He leaned forward, and the light fell full on his wonderfully modeled forehead. "I cannot tell you, Miss Drello, for I myself do not know——"

"Then—I suppose I might as well give up?"

Suddenly, as was his way, Wilhelm Sulzer lost his temper. He stormed, not at her, but at her incapacity.

He railed and swore in German, he shouted, and his face, still thrust forth out of the shadow of his chair, was red and angry.

"I know what you think," he concluded, "you sang to-day with more emotion than before, and you expected me to be fooled! You have gone and fallen in lof with some fool in a high collar, and you expect that to help your singing."

"If I expected that, it was your doing," she answered with dignity, "you told Barbara that I would sing better if——"

"Barbara is a babbeling peeg," he shouted. "And so I did tell her, but I meant love, real love. The half of all real love is pain. Where is your pain? What has loving taught you? Only that you are beautiful! Bah!"

It is impossible to describe the ferocious scorn in the fat old man's voice.

Maria winced.

"You have no right to be rude," she said slowly. "And you have no right to say that—that——"

"No right? Ha, you don't deny it! You *have* fallen in love. Not in the way I meant, but in the pretty English way. Oh the beautiful young man, I can see him! He tells you you are beautiful and you tell him —*ach, Du lieber Herr*, I know."

"It is not true," she burst out, "it is real love. I love him forever—I'd—I'd die for him——"

She broke off, her face as white as paper, and rushed from the room, too furious with herself to remember her manners.

Barbara had left the drawing-room, and, putting on her hat and jacket, Maria Drello left the house. At the end of the street, just as she was about to get

into a bus, she heard her name, and, turning, saw Tomsk.

His large, sad, white face looked sadder and whiter than ever as he gazed up at her. She had never before seen him elsewhere than at the piano, and shuddered secretly. There was something dreadful about him, and his mouth was working in a way fierce and piteous at once.

"Miss Drello," he said in a musical, deep voice, "I—I am sorry."

Then he scurried away over the wet street.

CHAPTER VII

PLAYWRIGHTS sometimes declare that novelists have the better part, in that they can describe, at any length they choose, the environment of their characters.

To me it seems that the playwrights hold a tremendous advantage, in that they present their characters in a visible and concrete milieu that unconsciously, without boring, shows the audience exactly in what surroundings live and have their being those people whose story is about to be presented to their judgment.

If I could, for example, have this book carefully and comprehensively illustrated, under my own eyes, how much dull description it would save.

"No, Mr. Binks," I could say, "that room that you have drawn is too high. I want a lower ceiling, to give a greater look of intimacy. Also that is a very bad table by the door. Please erase it and draw me a beautiful cinquecento one, rich with carvings"—and so on.

Thus every chapter could be headed by a beautiful drawing of the scene of its chief event, in which each detail was correct and the patient reader (and novel readers are very patient creatures) could be spared

the dreary inventories we are at present obliged to inflict on them.

As it is, it is necessary for the followers of Maria Drello's story to be told, instead of shown, what her room in her father's house was like.

It was a large room, looking over the garden at the front of the house. From two of its windows (which were hung with faded chintz, on which an impossible but graceful blue flower clustered in an infinity of oak leaves), there was a pretty view, first of the narrow garden, with its old stone walls on which creepers crept at different places, its three old trees, one the fine and lavish cedar under which Maria slept on her momentous Sunday morning, and over the wall one saw sections of houses and half a church with all its spire.

The third window commanded only a very ugly and neglected garden, and more sections of houses, and no one ever looked out of it. The walls of the room were papered in a warm shade of yellow faded beautifully, the bed curtains were of very old white muslin, mended and darned until they seemed almost to bear a delicate pattern.

There was a gate-legged table of old oak and in one corner stood the dressing-table, its stiffly starched, gaily beflowered skirts mended as delicately and ornately as the bed curtains. There were three Chinese chairs of red lacquer and cane, in the woodwork of which minute Chinamen in gowns, and Chinawomen in trousers, climbed mountains and crossed bridges and arrived at pavilions in which, undoubtedly, tea awaited them. Delightful chairs, these, brought from Paris,

years ago, by William Rossetti, as a wedding present to Rosamond Wells and William Drello. On the yellow walls hung seven pictures. One was a watercolor sketch by Dante Rossetti of the lovely Miss Wells, who had sat for him several times. She was a pretty woman, wearing on the occasion of the painting a sapphire-blue shawl and a delightful bonnet wreathed with small red roses.

The other pictures were engravings and etchings of good pictures, of the type popular thirty years ago, in narrow black frames.

In a little bookcase near the bed were Maria's favorite books—some of which she never mentioned, even to Barbara Gryce. One has one's literary reticences. One of Maria Drello's was a little faded blue volume printed in '56, and called "Oakleaves." Another was "The Love-letters of the Brownings," which the girl read with a guilty feeling, almost as if she had stolen the originals out of a drawer.

The letters were published, and she told herself it would be absurd not to read them, and yet—she had a vague sensation at other times of being in the confidence of two great lovers—they trusted her, she could not discuss them.

A fat, green Tennyson, given by the poet to her mother, bore on the flyleaf in the giver's writing the dedication, "To my dear friend Rosamond Drello, Xmas, 18—." Then was a volume of Leigh Hunt's "Essays," given by him to someone whose son gave it to Oscar Wilde, who had in one of the "Nows" underlined the words, "When ladies loiter in baths, and peo-

ple make presents of flowers," and who had written in the margin: "Oh, you delightful person!"

William Drello was one of those people to whom things accrue. People gave him things, and he kept them gratefully, if not with great appreciation.

His very watch was a gift from Sir Frederick Leighton, and his shabby old house was full of souvenirs of great men who, for some reason, had loved him. Whistler had even sat to him, and Drello had produced a very masterpiece of ineptitude which Whistler's mordant wit had spared because it was pathetic, and because Drello's joy in it was as disarming as a child's.

When Maria reached home that evening she went, as was her habit, directly to her room.

Thimblebee had lit the old-fashioned lamp with its flowered, green glass shade, the curtains were drawn, and, although it was the last of April, there was a little fire in the hearth. It looked very cozy, very homelike, and the girl gave a sigh of relief as she took off her boots and thrust her feet into a pair of worn blue slippers.

Her walk through the mist had been disheartening. It was dreadful to her that, in her zeal for her voice, she had told to Sulzer her beautiful secret; the secret she herself had hardly dared to envisage.

His laughter had hurt her like a clumsy hand on a wound; she had hated him as he jeered at her. But the episode had turned her thoughts from her voice to the thing that had happened two days before in the Abbey, and as she walked home, hurrying along the familiar streets, beautiful, in the wet gray of evening, so differ-

ent at the end of April from what it is in the winter, she had seen nothing of the fantastic poetry that lies over London like a rainbow, for those to see who can. She walked on a path too narrow for anyone but her and Frederick.

She was not of those who allow every little emotion to nibble like a mouse at their heart; she was twenty years old, and her heart had slept until now. And now it was awake, so wide awake that she could not forget it for a moment; it was like a bird in her breast. And she knew, had known from the first moment, what it meant. She loved, and she was glad, but glad as the first man must have been who ever climbed a hill and saw the sun rise. She was awed as well. Hanging her damp coat and skirt neatly over a chair, she sat down, wrapped in a dressing-gown, and leaned her head on her hand.

Of course, her first thought was that no one had ever loved as she did.

As naturally her second thought was, "And he?"

Then her lovely blush swept over her neck and face. She knew that he did.

And of course he would tell her and they would be married.

She was a very simple-minded creature, this beautiful, self-centered Maria; she faced the world with as great fearlessness as if it had been safely behind bars, and she the other side of them.

Hitherto her voice had been the object of her dreams; now Mr. Frederick was, that was all. She had run away from him the day before. After he had

gone out into the rain to fetch her father her courage had left her; it had not oozed, it had gone with a kind of bang, she had simply not dared face him again——

She looked at the hand he had kissed, as if it should have been marked.

She wondered for the thousandth time who, what, he was.

At least he must be a prince in disguise; or the greatest musician on earth; he was utterly unlike anyone she had ever met; he was so satisfyingly himself.

There by the fire she sat and dreamed, until, suddenly, having heard no sounds of doors or stair climbing, she looked up to see Doris Leate and Lurty standing before her.

"Wake up," they cried in a breath, "it's seven, and you must dress."

She stared, her wits coming back to her slowly, as they always did.

"It can't be seven—how do you do, Doris," she murmured blankly.

Doris took off her cloak, revealing her small person to be in elaborate evening dress.

While Maria stared, Lurty explained.

"Doris came home with me to tea, and guess who turned up? Frederick! Very sorry to miss you—in fact, my dear," the young man added waggishly, "I think we may consider that you have pretty thoroughly harpooned him!"

"Nonsense, Lurty," interposed Miss Leate, "he was only polite. However, my dear," she continued, glancing dartingly round the room, to which she had not

been admitted for years, and in which, her curious little mind felt, were things not meant for her to see, "Lurty asked him to dinner, and he has gone home to wash his hands and brush his hair, and will be here at eight."

Maria picked up the tongs and fumbled with them at the fire. Her hands had gone suddenly numb with cold, and she felt that she had better not try to speak because her tongue was stiff.

"Rather jolly room," commented Doris, putting up her gold filigree lorgnon and subjecting the shabby, intimate, lovable place to a rude, comprehensive stare, "only I must say you ought to have new bed curtains."

Even if Maria had been able to speak she could not have answered this onslaught. How could she explain the romance that dwelt to her in the delicate old fabric that her mother had bought, just before her death, eleven years before, and fashioned with her own hands for her daughter's room?

"Well," Lurty interrupted, with comfortable lack of ceremony, "climb into your best frock—Doris will go and talk to the Governor while I dress. I've asked Fazzy and Mrs. Crossfield and Fred—telephoned 'em."

Maria rose, gathering the folds of her faded blue dressing-gown round her in a way that roused a feeling of envy in Doris—it was so classic in its unconsciousness.

"But, Lurty, have you told Thimblebee?"

Doris laughed, and her laugh was of the tinkling variety.

"Of course he has—and ordered in two men from Gunter's and a few extra things——"

Maria said nothing.

"It was such short notice, Maria," her brother explained, half apologetically. "Mrs. Leate always has in Gunter when there's anyone important——"

"And who, this evening, is particularly important?"

At the extraordinary hauteur of her voice, the other two stood still, and stared.

"Well," Lurty stammered, "Frederick isn't exactly —well, you know what I mean."

"I don't." Maria's voice was very cold. "What *do* you mean?"

She stood there, the firelight edging her up to the waist, her white neck and face, just beyond its glow, like marble in their rigidity.

Lurty shrugged his shoulders. He did not wish Doris to see the way in which his queer sister affected him.

"Well, in plain English, then," he blurted out, swaggeringly, "it's easy to see that he's—a swell."

Maria looked at him seriously. "Lurty, dear," she said in a gentle voice. "That's a horrid word. Now, if you and Doris will go, I'll dress."

CHAPTER VIII

MR. BRUNCHER and Mr. Green, two of the great caterer's minions, were not quite pleased with their job the last night of April, 19—.

The butler's pantry was woefully inadequate, the china scant and not that of Grosvenor Square, the heavy old silver alone met with their approval.

In the kitchen these gentry were plainly unwelcome. They wanted things of which Jessie and Thimblebee had never even heard, and Jessie and Thimblebee did not mince matters in telling them so.

Jessie was busy with the roast lamb, and seemed to consider the proper heating of the *vol au vent* (brought in a cardboard box like a bonnet-box) quite unnecessary.

"My pastry's allus been considered good enough for anyone," she declared, with bitterness, "and you needn't tell me that all these things in the sauce is sweetbreads. Insides, I call 'em, just plain, general insides."

"Quite right, too," agreed Bruncher, a man of tact. Green was different. Of an atrabilious temper, he rather enjoyed a row, and he had been at a Countess's in Charles Street, Belgrave Square, the evening before, and, therefore, was suffering from his sudden drop in the social scale.

"I can't find only seven finger bowls," he declared, sourly.

"If they'd ha' told us we was to provide china and glass as well——"

Silently Thimblebee produced from an upstairs cupboard a dozen Waterford finger bowls. "There," she said with baffling brevity. "Don't break 'em. They're old Irish and worth their weight in gold."

The dining-room pleased the two artists. It was a long, low room, with several fine portraits on the walls, and a magnificent Georgian sideboard covered with massive and well-kept silver.

The napery was old, but as Bruncher—who flattered himself on his sense of beauty—at once saw, of the finest Irish linen.

"That there portrait is a Millais, or I'm very much mistaken," he declared, polishing a glass absently, his head on one side.

"Is it?" Green plainly cared not a jot. "Disgraceful, this glawss, I call it—except them finger bowls." Bruncher studied the picture closely in the gaslight.

"'Andsome chap, whoever 'e is," he declared.

And the man in the picture was indeed a handsome chap, William Drello in 1865. William Drello with Dundreary whiskers, checked trousers, and a high collar, his curly hair brushed forward over his ears, his magnificent eyes glowing like coals as he gazed at a small Grecian temple near the frame of the picture.

Opposite to him hung, over the mantelpiece, a portrait of his wife painted by Sargent shortly before her death. A beautiful woman in the early forties, sitting

by an open window against which her fine profile was outlined, a fleecy shawl drawn round her shoulders.

Bruncher's disparagement of the household in which he found himself diminished somewhat. "One of them rejuced families, or perhaps a son who married beneath 'im," he told the uninterested Green.

Then the door opened and a large basket of flowers was brought in, masses of white and purple orchids. The basket was low, and the butterfly-like flowers arranged so that it was hidden but for a suggestion of mauve ribbon.

Even the sophisticated Bruncher gasped as Thimblebee bore it in. He knew something of the price of flowers and he knew that this was one of Isaac's masterpieces.

"It's for Miss Maria," the good woman announced, bouncing the masterpiece down on a side table, "but I shan't take it upstairs now, she's late enough as it is——"

"That basket of orchids must have cost something like ten guineas," returned Bruncher solemnly, as befitted the mentioning of such a sum. "This 'ouse is a bit of a surprise!"

Harriet Thimblebee looked at him. She was a fat old woman with only one eye, and the lid fell over the empty socket in a curious fold, almost arch in its expression, as if it were winking.

"There's sat at dinner in this house," she answered, her voice thrilling with scorn of him and all of his kind, "Mr. Gladstone and Sir John Millais, and Sir Frederick Leighton, Lord Tennyson, Mr. Browning, and others

as great, but who you never heard the name of. We don't have Jews here, nor South African millionaires. We have," she paused out of breath, but still holding him fascinated by her unintentional wink, "great people 'ere, so don't you try to be grand. Caterers, indeed."

Her capability of expressing scorn was very strong, and he bowed to the blast.

"I saw that them pictures was something extry," he said feebly, setting the orchids in the middle of the table.

"Oh, yes—there's darns in the tablecloth, and there's only seven everyday finger bowls, but Millais done that of the master, and Mr. Sargent, who is a great artist even if he is an American, that of mistress. There! that's the door bell. You can go if you want to, I don't care, though it's my right——"

Bruncher, subdued in spirit, thoroughly out of his element and knowing it, pulled down his sleeves, straightened his body, assumed the old family retainer air that had in his profession done him such yeoman's service, and went through the wide hall to the door.

The first guests—one may as well view this party from the servants' eyes; all our parties, many of our joys and griefs, are thus seen—were Mr. Fazackerley and old Mrs. Crossfield, the widow of the sculptor. They came together, and would go together quite simply, arousing no comment in the minds of their friends, for they had been doing the same thing for years and all the novelty in it had died out.

Bruncher saw a pretty old lady with faded blue eyes and just a dash of powder in her white hair; an old

lady dressed with the utmost coquetry in silver-gray silk with a delicate foam of Malines lace at her wrists and throat.

"Nobody, most likely," the man thought, as he helped the old lady take off her black velvet cloak, "but she could give points to some of 'em as *is*."

Nicholas Fazackerley, on the other hand, roused an admiration in the servile breast.

Fazzy was nearly eighty, and in his day—a very long day—he had been a very great actor in his line. He had played *Tripley* to Mrs. Stirling's *Peg*, among other things; he had played in Irving's first night of "Two Roses," and for some years before the Batemans gave up the Lyceum, Fazzy had belonged to the company there.

And though it was twenty years since he had left the stage, he still went on giving a series of thumbnail sketches of the old comedian in private life.

He was opposed to the young school of actors who away from the theater look as much like younger sons, sporting baronets, or even professional men as in them lies; he belonged to the old school, part of whose pride lay in looking like actors.

Bruncher spotted him at once. "A hactor," the servant told himself in triumph as the old man hung up his hat. "No mistaking that 'air."

Fazzy and the lady he had loved for five and forty years passed him and went into the drawing-room, and then the bell rang again to admit—as the clock on the landing struck with Victorian deliberateness the hour of eight—a young man, in the most perfect clothes,

who gave the name of Mr. Frederick, and was about to go into the drawing-room when he suddenly stood still as if turned to stone, his eyes fixed on the staircase.

"Why did you run away on Monday?" he said sternly, without other greeting.

He had forgotten the menial, but the girl in black who was coming slowly downstairs had not even seen Bruncher.

"I—I could not see you—just then," she stammered in a muffled voice, her left hand pressed to her heart. "How—how do you do?"

"I have been utterly miserable, and you know it." He did not move, but waited till she had come quite close to him, when he took both her hands in his.

"Maria," he said quietly, but with no appearance of lowering his voice—it was as if he took for granted that they were alone, because he wished them to be—"I want to talk to you. I will stay till the others have gone."

Bruncher, something of a judge of a woman himself, watched her appreciatively. She was, he saw, trembling in delicate waves from her head to her feet.

"Mr.—Frederick," she answered, looking away from the blue boldness of his eyes. "You cannot do that. Some of them will stay very late——" As she spoke the bell rang again, and with a little soft cry she disappeared into the dining-room. Frederick looked after her, frowned, and remembered Bruncher's existence. "Go to the door," he said shortly. "You need not announce me."

When Bruncher had admitted the last guest, Freddy

Crossfield, a bald, rather dandified man of forty-five, he went back to the dining-room, and found there Miss Drello leaning over the basket of orchids with what he crudely described, later, as a face like a peony.

"Mr. Drello said I was to announce dinner at eight sharp, Miss——"

She started and stared at him. Everyone seemed to forget him, and he felt a slight stirring of hurt vanity.

"You are—the caterer's man?" she asked kindly.

"Yes, miss. We're Gunter's——"

"Oh, very well. I'll go to the drawing-room and you may announce dinner at once. Do you think," she added, with what seemed to him an absurd access of little-girl shyness, "that if I took out one orchid—a white one—to wear, it would show? Would show in the basket, I mean——"

Bruncher drew one out with a delicate and accustomed touch. "No, miss, not a bit, it don't. That's a fine lot of orchids, too——"

She nodded vaguely, pulled the long, white bloom through a loop of black ribbon on her dress, and left the room.

CHAPTER IX

LITTLE Miss Leate had achieved a dinner party of a magnitude most unusual in St. Anne's Terrace. Old Drello was at his proudest and best as host. In his younger days he had enjoyed a circumscribed but bright little fame as a dispenser of hospitality.

The great and busy men, whose friend he had all effortless grown to be, enjoyed the quiet of his spacious old house, the unexigent beauty of his wife, the simple craft of his Flemish cook.

He himself had always talked a great deal, but his talk was of the simple kind that assumes nothing and asks little, and therefore, when accompanied as his was by a bubble of innocent high spirits, is a rest and a pleasure to tired brains.

Time and distance, those two bugbears, had no horror for him even now in his old age, so there he sat, a most beautiful old man with a delighted light in his eyes, and memories—all pleasant—at his tongue's end.

"My dear Jacqueline," he said, his glass of very excellent sherry held up under the gasolier, where it sparkled like a large topaz, "I drink to our dear Jim. Not to his memory—that is a mournful custom—but to Jim as we all loved—love him still."

The little old lady who had indeed loved him in a way, but whose preference for Nick Fazackerley had always been such a remarkably open secret, bowed prettily. Mr. Frederick, who sat on Maria's left, leaned toward her.

"I drink to the most beautiful and wonderful woman in the world," he said, in that voice of his that seemed so peculiarly under control. He had hardly lowered it, and yet no one but herself had heard.

"Oh—please," she returned, too earnest to play at not understanding.

Then she added, while Fazackerley was holding forth about the gay old fifties, "I have not thanked you for the flowers."

"Flowers? I sent you no flowers. Oh, I see! The orchids? No—it was not I."

Her hand, which had been hovering over the flower she wore as if it had been a baby's head, closed quietly but ruthlessly on it, and she drew it forth crushed and spoilt and dropped it under the table.

Mr. Frederick watched her, his mouth compressed, his vivid eyes half closed.

"When I send you flowers, most beautiful," he said, "it will not be these silly, scentless things. Roses I will send you, and violets and mignonette. And," he paused, looking straight into her eyes, "the roses shall be white and red. Some all white and some all red."

"Horace Wigan used to say to me," they woke to hear Fazackerley's voice, " 'Nick,' he used to say——" It was at this point that Green dropped the gravy-boat, and the excellent sauce Hollandaise fell with a

splash on the floor, escaping Freddy Crossfield's shoulder by a miracle.

During the ensuing hubbub the ubiquitous Thimblebee having been summoned to mop up the starfish-like blemish on the rug, Mr. Bruncher made a few remarks to his subordinate in the pantry.

"Just one word from me'd get you the sack, Arthur Green," he ended. "You know that."

"I dew know it, Mr. Bruncher, and I ain't got no excuse except that it was, by chawnce, like, the first glimpse I'd 'ad of 'is face. And it startled me."

"Well, I tell you you ought to take a rest cure. It ain't 'im any more than it's the King, I tell you!"

"But it is. 'Im they was all the trouble about! Two years ago. You know! I tell you, Mr. Bruncher, it *is* 'im. Didn't I 'elp serve 'is dinner to 'im not so long ago in Grosvenor Place? Not a man I'd want my girl to—to——"

"I tell you what this gentleman is, Green," Mr. Bruncher declared threateningly. "'E's a gentleman —not more and not less. You'll be sayin' 'e's Crippen next. Now, then, 'ere's the piece de resistawnce, buck up——"

Maria, meantime, could not eat. She was very thirsty, but she was not hungry. And Frederick's eyes, which rarely left her face, grew to feel like two actual objects that pressed against her brow, or, more usually, her own eyes.

She trembled, her hands were cold, she could hardly speak.

And everywhere she looked she saw his eyes, now

almost brutal in their hot blueness, their controlling fire.

It was not, this, the love she had dreamed of, but it was a commanding, inevitable thing. It frightened her, and she knew that she was a brave woman. She knew, vaguely, that in his leashed strength there dwelt for her a great danger, and she knew that he was on the point of slipping the leash.

"You will sing for me to-night," he was not asking, but telling her; while Freddy Crossfield was talking across the table to her.

"Ah, yes—I do indeed thank you, Mr. Crossfield; they are quite beautiful; there was no card, so I didn't know," she said, smiling at the orchids, adding, in a sudden, deep tone to her left-hand neighbor, "Yes."

And when dinner was over, and the three ladies sat in the moonlit drawing-room, old Jacqueline Crossfield repeated Mr. Frederick's question, while the restless Doris strolled about.

"You will sing for us, my dear?"

"Yes, Mrs. Crossfield, only—I have not quite got my bearings yet. M. de Reszké is such a wonderful man—I sang one way with him, and—this afternoon, I had a lesson with Herr Sulzer and he affects one quite differently—I fear I shall never be a real artist."

She sighed as she spoke, and the lonely old woman took her hand.

"Maria, my love, you will be. But you see before it comes, you must suffer. Every artistic success that comes before suffering has—ripened one—is a success

of beauty, or of voice—or even of mere youth. Who is this Mr. Frederick?"

Maria started; the changing of subject was so abrupt.

"He is—a friend of Lurty's," she answered lamely. "All I know about him is that he *doesn't* belong to the Dorset Fredericks. His name, you see, has no 's.' "

"Ah, I hope Lurty knows all about him. Somehow I do not feel quite comfortable about him——"

When the men came in, Crossfield came straight to Maria. "Why did you take off the orchid you were wearing?" he began, but he was interrupted.

Frederick stood by the piano. "Miss Drello," he said, "you have promised to sing for me, and I must unfortunately leave very early. I have to go and see a cousin——"

"Your cousin must be something of a tyrant," broke in the comparatively young Crossfield angrily, "if you have to leave a dinner party to go to see him at ten o'clock."

Mr. Frederick smiled. "You are quite right, Mr. Crossfield; my cousin, the most delightful of men, *is* a bit of a tyrant. Now, Miss Drello, what will you sing for me?"

Fazackerley went to the piano and sat down. In the bright light the make-up on his face gave it a strange, perverted kind of pathos.

"What shall it be, Maria?" he seconded.

She hesitated. "Do—you like Schumann?"

"Indeed *I* do," answered Crossfield, with emphasis. "No one like Schumann, if you ask me."

On him Mr. Frederick turned the blue fire of his eyes.

"Miss Drello, I believe, asked *me*," he smiled. "Yes, I love Schumann, Miss Drello. Could it be 'Frühlingsnacht'?"

She bowed in assent. The coincidence seemed to her a miracle, and she literally could not speak for a moment.

Fazzy began, she folded her hands and sang, standing simply without any of the thousand kinds of poses to which singers are subject.

Old Mrs. Crossfield watched her closely. Something had happened, and Jacqueline Crossfield scented a love affair, which she adored, as do many old women who have had as many as they wanted themselves.

Maria had never sung as she was singing then. Her voice held something of the nightingale's throbbing, and was yet warmer, more human, than ever before. Her eyes held by Frederick's, she sang on, physically unable to turn hers away. And at the end of the song her crimson flush wrapped her like a banner. There was a little pause, and then everyone burst into enthusiastic praises. Everyone except the man whose eyes still held hers, and whose vivid face had grown very pale.

"Might I," he asked politely, without uncrossing his arms or moving, "write a note here, Miss Drello, so that I can leave it on my way to my cousin's?"

Doris came forward. "Of course. I'll show you—just here." He bowed without returning her glance and followed her across the room to the writing-table,

where he sat down, his back to the little company, all of whom, for some reason, watched him as he chose a pen and leaned over the sheet of paper.

There was a pause, a pause full of drama, yet no one appeared to notice the strangeness of such a silence, and no one spoke until the young man rose, putting his letter into his pocket.

Gracefully, if a trifle absently, he made his adieux, and departed, without saying a word beyond good-bye to Maria.

When the house door closed a chorus of questions and comments broke loose—Lurty was besieged with inquiries as to who and what his friend was, where they had met, who his father was. Lurty, at his wits' end, stuck to the story that they had been at the same school, when suddenly Fazackerley broke in:

"Unless you are quite sure about him since you left Westminster, Lurty," he said slowly, the characteristic lines in his face deepening under his make-up, "I think I would not have him here. He is a charming fellow, but—there is something queer about him. I have seen his picture somewhere, I have an idea—and—well, I have an uncomfortable feeling that he is not what he seems."

Two hours later, when finally Fazzy and Mrs. Crossfield had gone, Maria went slowly upstairs.

She loved Frederick, but she, too, felt that there was something mysterious about him. He was most certainly a gentleman, but——

On her dressing-table lay a letter addressed, she knew at once, in his writing. It was the letter he had

written so coolly in the drawing-room, under all their eyes.

The girl locked her door and sitting down by the fire Thimblebee had apparently, in view of the renewed rain that beat so loudly against the window, judged necessary for her comfort, slowly opened the letter.

> My Beloved—for you are that to me, and I use the word to a woman for the first time in my life—I must talk to you. I must tell you what you know, and you must tell me what I know. Be in the Broad Walk in Kensington Gardens tomorrow, rain or shine, at four. And you must come prepared to be brave, to realize your youth, and to use it, to be uninfluenced in your decision by anything but the One Big Fact, that you are mine.
>
> I will kiss your feet and carry you in my hands, as the Germans say, but you are my woman and I am your man, and we must be together.
>
> A. F.

It was one o'clock that night before the buffeting rain spent its force against unlighted windows in the upper right-hand room of old William Drello's house in St. Anne's Terrace. . . .

CHAPTER X

FLOWERS came early the next afternoon, a huge osier chest full of red and white roses, violets, and mignonette.

No one in the house had ever seen such a gift of flowers, and the fact that there was with it no card caused great excitement.

Lurty, by one of those dispensations of Providence that occur every now and then, despite the unromantic practicality of these present days, had rushed to his bus ten minutes before the arrival of the great Mr. Isaac's uniformed slave.

Old William, who adored flowers, was delighted to assist with the setting up of this magnificent offering, his tongue wagging the while.

"It must be Lurty's friend—the young man with the curious manner——"

"There must be a card somewhere," Thimblebee snapped. (She had partaken of pastry the evening before, and her gout was bad.)

But there was no card.

Maria, very pale, with odd dark circles round her eyes, made no conjectures as to the sender of the flowers.

The square hall, with its old white paneling, was a

place of sunshine that day; the door stood wide open and from the garden came a smell of wall-flowers and lilacs in the sun. . . .

The rain had ceased during the night, and old William Drello had been toying with the soil in the way that seemed to him to be gardening, so that added to the exquisite smell of the flowers was the homely, primeval one of damp earth.

On the square landing the old clock ticked; the blue stair carpet, faded to a shade calculated greatly to please a Chinaman, held a pale streak of sunshine halfway up the clock.

From the red and white roses and the violets came a scent that grew in strength as they were lifted from their prison and lay in freedom on the table, the floor, and even on the stairs.

Old Drello, a faint color lit in his cheeks by his sheer pleasure in the flowers, glanced at his daughter, who, in compliment to the first really warm day, wore a close-fitting dress of a narrow blue and white stripe, that made her look like a very beautiful hospital nurse.

"I like young Frederick, Moll," he said, with what she knew he felt to be great slyness.

She laughed, "Father, darling—do you?"

"Yes. How old are you?"

The appositeness of his question struck her, and she paused, a huge bunch of crimson roses in her hand. "Why," she wondered, "crimson and white ones?"

"Me? I am—shall be twenty-one in October. I am no longer," she returned blithely, "in my first youth."

"I see. Well, my dear, and do you like him?"

She laughed, one of the lovely never to be retrieved laughs that occur in one's very early years just because one is alive.

"Do I like whom?"

Drello had meant to be fatherly, he had intended to talk to her as her dead mother would wish him to do; but in his seventy years he was too young to insist against her mood.

"Loveliest of maids," he declared, "the clock on the stairs which ought, according to the American poet, to be saying, 'Forever, never!' is saying, 'Two o'clock, two o'clock, Sulzer waits, Sulzer waits!'"

She came to him and put her wet hands on his shoulders.

"Beautifulest of old men," she retorted, "I am off. And after I have sung, I am going—Oh, my dear father—to Kensington gardens, to meet someone. And I'm so happy!"

"Kiss me." He kissed her.

"You are so young, my child, and I am old. If—if my Rosamond were alive—she would be able to advise you. I can't—I am an ignorant old man—I can only hope. And dearest," he stood in the deepening sunlight, his eyes full of it, "I will, for you, always hope. . . ."

At half past three, having sung very badly and evoked the worst of its languor from the armchair, Maria Drello left Sulzer's house.

She wore a new coat and skirt of soft, loose-woven, crocus-colored stuff, with a white blouse and a small black hat.

From Chelsea she walked rapidly to the Bayswater Road, tall, dignified, absent-minded, the single white rose in her buttonhole scenting the whole world for her.

It was such a fine day that the streets were full, and her progress was slow.

She never turned, but made her leisurely way up the King's Road, then across Carlyle Square to the Exhibition Road. Many people looked at her, but because she never looked round, she never saw a queer figure that was following her at a distance of two hundred yards or so. Tomsk, in a new topper, tearing along like some strange ape, his hands encased in bright yellow gloves, his eyes fixed on her. She reached Kensington Gardens promptly, and as some friendly clock struck four, she paused; in the middle of the Broad Walk she stopped, till her welcoming blush had died away. A little away from the nurses and babies in the sunshine, stood Mr. Frederick, awaiting her. He led her with barely a greeting to a place near by where the grass was starred with flowers, where a tree like an umbrella was blossoming bravely, and where although many painted green chairs stood about, they were in a kind of island of isolation. Here he stopped and turned to her.

"Maria," he said gently, "you know that I love you."

"Yes." Her manner was as simple as his.

"You are—mine."

She raised her dark eyes to his, and in each of hers was a star of interrogation.

His gloved hand rested on the back of one of the

green chairs. With an impatient frown he tore the glove from it, and then again grasped the chair.

"I have," he went on, "made love to many women; I have never loved before."

She bowed her head in a strange kind of submission.

"And you love me?" he added.

"Oh—yes, yes, I do love you."

A cloud had come over the sun, and the loiterers in the Broad Walk began to disperse rapidly. The shadows, by disappearing, darkened the world. It grew darker, and Maria and Mr. Frederick were now practically alone. She wondered, and he saw her wonder, why he did not come nearer to her, but he did not move.

"Do you trust me, Maria?"

"Of course."

His blue eyes were gathering an expression that she had never seen before, and she lowered hers, because she did not understand, and it made her tremble.

"My sweet—you will love me always?"

"Yes." But her eyes were clouded.

"Then—you belong to me, and I, in a way—to you."

She gazed steadily at him, her eyes very brave.

"Why only in a way?" she asked simply.

There was a short pause. She could see the veins in his hand on the chair-back dilate and darken, his young face looked suddenly years older, and he was very pale.

"Because my life is a strange one. And I want you to love and to trust me."

"Of course I love and trust you."

"But, oh, my sweet—do you? Without my mentioning marriage—can you still love and trust me?"

A tree near by, stirred by a slight wind, was shedding its pale pink petals. For a moment she watched them.

Then she asked him, "But—why? You are not already—married——"

He started toward her, but restrained himself.

"No! Of course I am not. It is that I—well, I am not free, though not in that way. But as to love—oh, my God," he burst out in a kind of groan, "can't you feel that I love you?"

She did feel it. She knew. And yet she drew back, over the rich grass, crushing little juicy spring flowers with her heels as she did so.

"I do not understand, Mr. Frederick," she said gravely. "You must tell me more."

He could see her bosom heave; he knew how her heart was beating; in her cheeks was a heavenly pallor. Innocent passion is a beautiful thing.

He winced. "You are right, dear—but I can't tell you now. I will write, and when you read my letter, remember how I love you."

The flesh of his face seemed to recede, bringing out the bones.

"Maria—say it once more——"

Her knees shook, her eyes grew dim, as she obeyed. "I love you."

The sun came out again as they stood gazing at each other, and a bird began to sing. Then, very gently, he bade her leave him, and without speaking she dragged herself slowly back to the Broad Walk.

As she reached it, she found, to her amazement, little

Tomsk sitting on one of the green chairs, his large head erect, his face full of excitement.

"Mr. Tomsk!"

"Yes," he declared, scrambling down. "It is me. I am not well, and Mr. Sulzer let me go after you left. I did not expect," the dwarf added, with a curious mixture of malevolence and respect, "to find you talking to —him."

"To—him?" her eyes were vacant, for she was not really listening.

Tomsk drew himself up to his full height of nearly four feet, and removing his hat made a low bow to the solitary figure near the little blossoming tree.

"Yes," the little man declared, smacking his lips with relish, "with H. H. Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland."

CHAPTER XI

MARIA woke with a start after a nearly sleepless night.

There was to her an aggravation of her resentful grief in the fact that it was, of all people in the world, Tomsk who had told her.

Tomsk, the grotesque, negligible dwarf, had known, and she, whom it so vitally concerned, had not.

Tomsk had accompanied her at her lessons both on Monday and the day before when her voice seemed to herself charged with the name Frederick. Tomsk could even then, on Monday, have said to her, "My dear girl, don't be absurd, the man who stared at you in the Abbey is a prince of the blood!"

It seemed unkind, cruel of the dwarf not to have stopped her at once in the beginning, when, as it now seemed to her, it would have been so easy.

And yet even now, as she dressed, sitting down now and then with a curious collapse of strength quite new to her, it was only Thursday.

Five days ago she had barely known that there was such a man. Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland. He had told her his name began with an A, and was absurd. Augustus is an absurd name. She paused in

brushing her hair, and stared into the fire. Suppose—just suppose for a moment that he was just an ordinary gentleman, what should she have called him?

Augustus—Gus?—Gus was a name for a youth with plastered hair and pearl buttons all over him; a youth for cocoanut shies and merry-go-rounds on Hampstead Heath.

She laughed aloud. His actual position at least saved her from the necessity of deciding what to call him.

Quite as usual she dressed herself, omitting no small detail, wasting so little time that, in spite of a feeling that she had been up for hours, and was ready again for bed, she reached the dining-room before either her father or her brother.

The extreme acuteness of all the senses that to some people always accompanies a shock of any kind was on her, and she seemed to see the familiar room as she had never seen it before.

The shape of the Victorian tea service struck her as something new; for the first time she observed that the little knobs on the lids were carefully carved acorns. How funny that she had never noticed them. There were blemishes in the wall paper, too; the room ought to be repapered.

At length she approached the pile of letters that lay by her father's place. *He* had said he would write.

There were two letters for her, but neither was in his so well-known writing.

One was from Doris Leate, all dashes and exclama-

tion points, asking her and Lurty to dine one day in the following week to meet a Mr. Parradine—"a cousin of the present peer."

Maria leaned back in her chair overcome by a feeling almost like sickness. She had not even lived through one morning. And to-morrow was coming. Next week was coming, and next month and next year. And he—even in her misery she could not give him the name that seemed to her so preposterous—had not so much as kissed her.

A storm of ignorant, innocent, unanalyzed passion swept over her, leaving her as cold as ice.

If only he had held her in his arms, hard, so as to hurt her.

She would have liked his strength to hurt her, she would have liked—she knew not what.

She was as uninformed in such matters as a shy, self-respecting, and incurious young girl can be, but her whole being was in a kind of silent uproar, and it frightened her.

She poured herself a cup of tea and drank it hurriedly, smitten with a great thirst.

Then her father came in, looking, as he always did, strikingly clean. His was one of those close-grained skins that always keep a look of youth, and now in the gray morning light he had a fresh appearance that was delightful.

In his shabby velvet coat was a red rose, at which he sniffed as he entered.

"Good morning, my love! I have, you see, stolen one of your roses. They have a scent like nothing else

in the world. It always reminds me," he went on, unfolding his large, unstarched napkin as if it were a banner and he about to wave it on some highly joyous occasion, "of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve rambling about taking their first look at the garden—and at each other."

She gave him the large bowl of bread and milk, on which he always breakfasted, and he ate and opened his letters with an air of comfortable leisure.

"Aha! Here they are, about dear old Jimmy's letters again. Gone up fifty pounds, too."

"Don't you think it would be better to wait?" she suggested.

"Till Jacqueline dies? My dear, she's never going to die. Fazackerley will, but not Jacqueline! She'll drive the last surviving horse, Jacqueline will!"

He laughed, pleased at the idea. "Besides, I should naturally not let this fellow have the whole lot, and I should leave out certain bits."

Maria leaned toward him. "Father—did he, Mr. Crossfield, care for her?"

"Care for her? Devoted!" returned the old man, breaking more bread into his bowl of milk.

"Yes, but I mean—did he really—love her?"

He stared at her. She so rarely discussed things with him that he was surprised, as well as a little flattered.

"Did he love her, my dear?" He paused, reflecting, and then said quietly, "I think it would be fair to tell you, after all these years—no, he did not—not as you mean."

"I am glad."

"Why, Maria?"

"Because—if he had, he must have suffered——"

"Oh, you mean about Fazackerley. Yes, quite so, only, you may be sure that if he had loved her—there would have been no Fazackerley."

"I see."

"It was a sad story—or saddish," he went on, warming as he always did, to narration. "He was engaged to a girl, a model, and he adored her. Poor Jim! And quite suddenly, no one knew why, she developed blood poisoning, and—just died. He nearly did. Clean out of his head for weeks. We all took care of him, but he liked to have me the best, because, he used to say, I wasn't clever!"

"Dear father," she murmured.

"Well, my dear, I shouldn't like *you* to think so—glad you don't—but it's true enough!"

He smiled at her, the beautiful, childlike smile so ennobling to his old face.

"And some four or five years later he met Jacqueline, and married her—chiefly, I think, because Branscome wanted to."

"Of course he—knew about Mr. Fazackerley?" She had never called him anything but Fazzy before; the occasion seemed to demand ceremony.

"Yes, talked to me about it more than once. Used to say he couldn't bear Fazzy to be unhappy, as he had been. He and Fazzy had always been the closest friends, you know—but, God bless my soul," he broke off, "what a scandalous old man I am, to be telling you

such tales. Here's Lurty, to put us straight, and tell us all about everything!"

Lurty did not protest against this potentiality. To be considered well informed was one of his ideals.

"My word, Maria!" he cried, as he sat down, "you look like the wraith of—you look awful. Not getting flue, are you!"

"No, I'm all right. Here's your cocoa. Have you a letter from Doris? Because she may want me to tell you that she wants us to dine on Wednesday to meet—somebody who is related to somebody."

Lurty had a letter, and when he had read it his face fell.

"She wants me to bring Frederick," he grumbled. "Can't see what on earth she sees in the fellow!"

"Likes his clothes," suggested the old man. "So do I. *Excellent* clothes. Well bred, too, though I don't know that I particularly like him. His face is very familiar," he added thoughtfully. "I wonder where I've seen him?"

Maria knew that this was her chance. She would have given all she possessed in the world to be able to say calmly, "In processions, and the illustrated papers. He is Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland."

Or she might laugh and exclaim, "Oh, you geese! Can't you see that he's like the King? Well, that's because they're cousins."

But she could say nothing; her mind was in shackles.

Lurty was full of his own affairs, as most people usually are. (Those who are not are very unjustly stigmatized as curious, by the way.)

He was doing a new story, of the period of Theodoric, of which imperial person he knew nothing at all. "Perfectly easy to get it up a bit, you know," he told his eggs and bacon, "two days' grind will do it. I happen to have that kind of mind. There's a fellow at the *Orb* office who daren't risk even an allusion to any particular period without what he calls serious research. Glad I'm not built that way. It's a funny thing, Governor, where'd I get it from, that sort of—of ability to seize the necessary facts at a glance? Not from you, is it?"

The old man looked at him, his drooping eyelids not quite concealing a spark of amusement in his eyes.

"No, no, my son," he answered gently. "I never had the slightest gift that way."

"Then I suppose it must be from—mother." Lurty's voice softened a little; his mother having been one of the unobtrusive, gentle, loving women who are never forgotten.

William Drello rose. "Your mother knew no more about historical research," he said, as if he were according her the highest praise in the world, "than she knew about—the suffrage."

Then he left the room.

"I shan't ask Frederick to go to Mrs. Leate's," Lurty declared, finishing his cocoa. "I was rather struck by what Fazzy said Thursday evening. There *is* something unusual about him."

"And you think unusual people are to be avoided?"

For some reason the rather impervious youth was

very sensitive to the slightest suspicion of scorn from his beautiful sister.

"I don't, either," he snapped. "You know I don't. But"—rising—"I don't mind telling *you*, young lady, that I don't altogether like the way he behaves to *you!*"

As he reached the door, holding his short, square body with some pomp, she laughed gently.

"Don't you, Lurty?" she said.

CHAPTER XII

PRINCE AUGUSTUS FREDERICK, that morning, had *café au lait* and boiled eggs for his breakfast—on a little table set just within the open window of his sitting-room in one of London's royal palaces.

He had several cups of coffee and three eggs, for he was young, almost happy, and thoroughly hungry.

His room was large and comfortable, but not luxurious.

The chintz curtains were faded, the chairs deep and easy, but shabby, and the pictures, except for a few hunting prints and one or two photographs of some of the young man's favorite paintings, were portraits of plain men and women, badly painted some time in the eighteenth century.

Of the letters beside the beautiful Georgian coffee-pot, four were thrown, torn across but unopened, into the waste-paper basket.

Two others, marked personal, one of purple paper, with a monogram at the top, the other of ordinary white, but violently scented, he glanced through with the half flattered, half bored smile of the male conqueror disillusioned.

Then he rang, sent the twenty remaining letters to Mr. Creswell, and would Mr. Creswell come to speak to him in an hour's time.

Outside in the beautiful gardens, half a dozen nursemaids wheeled prams, and several rosy children were being exercised, seemingly unable to make up their minds whether on the whole it was better to march solemnly, or to prance just out of reach of the governess or the nurse.

Augustus Frederick watched them with amusement. He was really fond of children.

Seen here, in the clear morning light, his face at its calmest and best, he was a rather charming-looking man, not so young as he appeared in moments of keen interest, not so old as extremely strong emotion made him appear.

His nose was slightly aquiline, and his chin, though not at all weak, was a little receding.

He was remarkably well built, and stood just six feet in low heels, rather tall considering his family.

He was clean shaven, and his lips had a peculiar muscular look, under their smooth, dark pink surface.

When he had finished his breakfast, he gathered up the crumbs of his rolls, and going to the window, scattered them on the sill, which immediately presented to the people in the park below a flutter of greedy sparrows, for this was a habit of His Highness, and the birds knew it.

To many young Britons in the process of home education he was, therefore, known as The Good Prince.

He knew this, and experienced therefrom merely a

mild thrill of flattered vanity, no surprise whatsoever.

And in many ways he was a good prince. Firstly, he was patience itself with his remarkably evil-tempered old mother; secondly, he conformed with what may almost be classed as rigidity to his official duties. He was not of sufficient importance to come in, as he expressed it, for any of the more important cornerstones, but when one of his comparatively humble rank happened along, he laid it with goodwill and grace.

Also, he had a great talent for meeting lesser Royalties at railway stations. His successful chaperonage of a certain coal-black majesty, several years back, had won him real fame, of a kind, and it may be assumed that the Black Majesty to this day occasionally dreams (on a red plush and gilt throne that the Prince persuaded him to buy at Maple's), somewhere in darkest Africa, of the remarkable joys offered to him in London.

As to debts, Augustus Frederick had not more than many elder sons of simple gentlemen, and as to women, it may be said of him only that he never missed an opportunity for a love affair with an attractive woman, although these affairs were not so numerous as one might suppose, he being in the first place rather hard to please, and in the second place possessed of but a small income.

As he made his way, in a taxi, toward St. Anne's Terrace, beautifully clad in gray, with a red rose in his coat (this habit of wearing buttonholes, not popular at present, was a small affectation arising out of a real love of flowers), he went his way right merrily.

He was madly in love with Maria Drello, and he knew that she was as madly in love with him. It is hard to explain why he did not feel himself a seducer and a villain, but he did not. Had anyone dared to impugn his honor in the matter, he would have felt amazement even before he felt the insult.

His conquests had hitherto been of the facile kind, the women being either the active party or accomplices, rarely victims.

He did not feel that Maria was to be a victim. He was giving her his first real love, and he knew this fact and valued it; and, moreover, it is possible that, for all his simplicity, the other fact weighed much in his mind, that he was an English prince.

And all this without snobbery! So, rejoicing, he went his way.

The quiet old house looked good to him when the garden door had been opened; he paused for a moment, looking at the flowers, the trees, the chairs and table under the cedar.

It was the home of peace, and he had every intention of destroying it, and yet he did not feel wicked.

It was quite simple to him. Maria loved him, and he loved her, and she must be his. Possibly the strange force of her love, ungirlish in its strength, took from him the perception of her helpless youth.

A small, fair girl might have roused his instinct of protection, but Maria was a tall, strong, black-browed woman, whom he had seen to shake with a passion as strong as his own, though she doubtless did not know it.

Thimblebee stood at the open house door, and ush-

ered him with some grandeur into the sun-filled drawing-room.

He looked round for his roses, but noticed, with a smile, their absence. In her room, no doubt. Then the door opened and Maria came in. Maria in the sapphire-blue gown of the Abbey. Maria with a face literally without color, but with a positive blaze of light in her eyes.

He advanced eagerly, his arms held out.

But, sweeping a very deep curtsey, she said quietly, "Good morning, sir."

"Ah—then you know?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. She looked straight at him, obviously trying to force him to use his prerogative of beginning the conversation.

He walked slowly to the window and back, his face whitening, and his resemblance to the reigning family increasing in the stress of emotion.

"Maria——"

"Miss Drello, please, sir."

"Miss Drello. Do not misjudge me."

"I wish not to misjudge you. If your Highness would kindly explain what you *did* mean."

In her pride she seemed his equal, if not his superior, in rank, and he felt it. Suddenly there swept over him a wave of shame at his own ineptness.

"I will tell you," he answered sternly. "I loved you and I wanted you for my own——"

"Mistress," she finished, using a word that had perhaps never before passed her lips.

"My own—love, my dear love. Remember, I cannot help this accident of rank."

"Nor I, sir." Plainly she was not going to help him.

"At least I have the right to ask one thing of you," he went on in desperation. "Forget for half an hour who I am and drop that damned 'Sir.' "

'Very well. Go on."

There was something intensely virginal in her, he noticed, something he had not observed in her before; it was as if the menace of its loss were drawing out the expression of the quality, as the heat of the sun brings the scent of some flowers.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

"Of course."

They both sat down, and with folded hands she waited.

"When I met your brother," he began, "it was only a joke—he will tell you about it. Then two days later I saw you in the Abbey. It happened then that I loved you. Like a flash of lightning. It turned me faint, I felt ill—you knew this."

"Yes."

"And—then I called. Your hands were wet—you were arranging some flowers. Your father was here. And—you ran away—because you were afraid."

She bowed her head in stately acknowledgment of the truth of what he said.

"I came the next day, and you were out. The house was like—a ghost. Nothing in it was real. Your brother asked me to dinner. Why did you think I talked to you at dinner as I did ? You knew!"

Again she bowed in silence.

"And when you sang, you sang to me. For me the song of the lover at night in the garden—it ends, 'She is mine, she is mine.' "

He paused, but she did not speak. He could see her nostrils dilate and her mouth thin itself.

"Then," he resumed, with a deep breath, "I knew, I knew that—that you must be mine. Altogether mine. And," he added quietly, "you must."

"Are you asking me," she returned with a concentration of bitterness that amazed him, "to be your wife?"

"You know perfectly well I can't marry you. What puerile nonsense! I am asking you to love me, to let me love you, to let us both make the most of the miracle that has come to us!"

He had risen and came very gently toward her.

"Maria, I love you, I want you. I want, in the whole world, only you."

She drew back in her chair; she was afraid of his nearness. He saw it, and flushed the deep red in which blue eyes seem bluer than ever.

"No, no. Do not touch me. I—yes, I do love you, prince or not. I'd love you if you were the king himself, and—I can't bear too much."

Stooping suddenly, he lifted her out of her chair, and straining her close to him kissed her repeatedly. She did not struggle, indeed her arms tightened round his neck and she kissed him.

"I love you," she stammered. "My dear love, my man—my beloved."

Then her hold loosened, her lips were cold under his. She had fainted dead away in his arms. He laid her on the hard, blue sofa, wetted his handkerchief in a vase and bathed her head with great gentleness and skill. He was not alarmed. She had not fainted, he knew, from weakness.

When after a few moments she opened her eyes, she smiled a little. "Thank you. I—I am not ashamed. I am glad. But—you must go now, and I will never see you again."

He stared, the triumph he had believed to be so absolute crumbling before his eyes.

"Never see me——"

"Never again, so long as I live."

She rose, and going to the mantelpiece pulled the old-fashioned, tasseled bell rope.

When Thimblebee's footsteps were heard, Maria Drello dropped another deep curtsey. "Good-bye, sir," she said.

CHAPTER XIII

"POOR Anne," as the members of her very larg family connection called her (behind h back), sat in the, to unhappy people, unhapp hour of from three to four, by a deep niched windo in a Jacobean house in the heart of London. But th hour had no terrors for poor Anne, because poor Ann was not unhappy.

At first thoughts she seemed to have trouble enough; a tyrannical old mother who used her as cushion into which to push all the pins she could n push into others, a slight crook in her little back, a a pronounced lack of beauty in her little face; a cous whose word was law and who certainly ruled her, as l ruled all the family, with a rod of iron, although h manner was of the pleasantest; the memory of thwarted love affair of twenty years before; a dee seated loathing of the various social affairs to whic it was necessary for her to go; above all, shyness pronounced as it had been twenty years before whe she had made her first bow to the Queen.

Yet, despite these various trials, she was not u happy. A small, thin woman of forty-five, lookin owing to much illness fifty, she wore her abundan grayish hair in a kind of nest of little curls extendin

nearly to her eyebrows. Her eyes were blue and rather prominent, but they expressed the greatest gentleness and kindness. She wore that afternoon in May an ugly shade of blue, trimmed in a rambling way with passementerie, which she had always liked.

And she was knitting one of a pair of pink-and-white bed shoes. In the courtyard under her window a sentry passed to and fro. Otherwise perfect quiet reigned in the old-world room, which had been done over at some period of Queen Victoria's reign, and was therefore what it is now proper to consider very ugly.

There were in it, however, things of beauty, if not of great value. Even the faded medallioned carpet had a charm of its own, and on the mantelpiece stood lusters of delightful, apple-green glass. Poor Anne loved the room, and her love was undutifully accentuated by the fact that its being up three flights of stone stairs rendered it practically immune from attacks from her mother.

She had taken her daily drive with the old lady (of whose tongue it was rumored even the powerful cousin, the head of the family, went in a certain fear), she had lunched in great state with some distinguished guests, and now the rest of the beautiful warm day was hers to do with what she pleased.

She gave a comfortable sigh. Middle age, that period of life so much more abhorred by most women than definite old age, held no terrors for her. Her life was full of small, unselfish fads and interests. The feet for which the bed shoes were destined belonged to a flower-girl in a Home for Incurables near Whitstable.

She was going down there herself, in a fortnight, a
in the next room was a big box nearly filled with wool
offerings of different sorts. The poor things would
glad of them.

The kind sunlight streamed into the room; the bla
marble and gilt clock between the apple-green luste
ticked its fat, contented tick. Poor Anne was ve
happy.

And then the door was burst open and a distract
young man entered, his face pale, and worn, a
tragic.

"Where's Cousin Sophia?" he asked hurriedly, a
when she replied that her mother was downstairs,
said, "Thank God."

"But, my poor Fritz, what is the matter with yo
You look wretchedly ill."

"I am, Anne. I am the most unhappy wretch alive
he groaned, throwing his hat and gloves and stick
the sofa, and sinking into a crewel-work chair shap
like a seashell.

"Poor Fritz."

Her gentle voice, a little guttural, seemed to soot
him. Without raising his head from his left hand,
held out his right to her.

"I wish all this damn nonsense would die out on
and for all," he declared.

"What damned nonsense?"

He groaned, and looked up. "Oh—us. The who
thing. It's piffle from beginning to end. It's bound
end in a couple of hundred years' time. Why can't
end now?"

She laid her thin, white hand on his smooth hair. "Fritzchen," she asked gently, "who is she?"

Beside her delicate maturity he looked almost a child. He had always been her favorite and in her sentiment for him was something motherly.

She did not, in her wisdom, repeat her question, and after a pause he answered it.

"It—she is—just a girl," he murmured, kissing her kind hand, "a lady, but—not even noble."

"Oh, my poor child!"

She drew a chair close to his and sat down, still holding his hand in hers.

"But——" She was old-fashioned in her delicacy and reticence, but he understood.

"No, no," he answered roughly, "I—I was a beast to her, Anne, and she—talk about the dignity of royalty! She was ten thousand times a queen."

"What did she say?"

Hotly he poured forth the whole story; that they had met four times before she knew who he was, that when she did find out—"when I went, that morning—the day before yesterday morning, she made me a curtsey—and called me 'Sir.' Oh, Anne!"

And Princess Anne—poor Anne—listened to it all. She heard his inadequate description of the house, of the old father—"like an old man in a fairy tale"—and of her incomparable beauty and charm.

"I've been a rotter, you know, dear," he went on, comforted by her eyes and her hand; "I didn't mean to be, but I was. You know what Society women are—a great deal worse than the other kind, poor things. But

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I could kick myself across Hyde Park," he went on, with the self-disgust that is so good for young men, "if I could wipe out of her mind what—what——"

He paused, and she filled in the pause for him. "What you meant, Fritz, dear."

"Yes, what I meant. Oh, Anne! She used those very words and I'm sure it had never come nearer to her than the times of Henry VIII."

The hideous, but withal pleasant, clock struck four, during the pause that followed.

"And Henry VIII was—a long time ago, dear," she said.

Again there was a silence, after which her soft voice once more filled the silence.

"Fritz—have you not often been sorry for—his wives?"

The young man rose with a sudden movement of impatience. "Whose wives? Oh, his—Henry's! Yes, of course I have. But why?"

Little "Poor Anne" followed him to the window.

"Have you ever thought," she insisted gently, "what it was that—that ruined them?"

"No."

"Well, Freddy, dear, do you know, I have. It was—it's such a horrid word, but I must say it. It wasn't that he *loved*, it was—*lust*."

He watched her crimsoning face curiously for a moment, then bent and kissed it.

"Poor little Anne! What a dreadful word! Well, if you mean me—this time you are wrong, sweet cousin."

She faced him gravely. "Am I, Fritz?"

"Anne—I love her. I want her for the mother of my children; for—my wife."

She gave a little cry. "No, no, not that! That cannot be—surely you know it. He would never allow it."

A note of personal suffering in her voice arrested his self-centered attention.

"And—after all," he returned, answering the tone, rather than the words; "why should he rule us—as private men and women?"

Her prominent eyes filled with slow and hurtful tears.

"Because, dear Fritzchen—we are—his subjects. The first of his subjects."

After a long pause he answered gravely, "WE are of his blood."

"Yes. But—Oh, my dear, our first duty—surely you can see it?—is to give an example to those who haven't—that help. Augustus Frederick," she added, with the beautiful and impressive solemnity of those who have no idea that they are being solemn, "we are—the greatest of his subjects."

In the courtyard somebody arrived on a restive horse, whose hoofs struck high, sharp notes from the old cobblestones on which Queen Elizabeth herself had stood.

The young man walked restlessly about the room, his face haggard with pain. At last poor Anne spoke:

"Freddy, dear—when I was twenty, we went to India

—you know. And—one of the aides-de-camp—well—you know who he was," she drew a deep breath but went bravely on, her small face white. "I was never pretty, Fritz, but—he did get to care—God knows why. And one night," her voice faltered, "one night in Calcutta when the moon was quite new, and small, he told me."

The young man raised grave, impersonal blue eyes to hers.

"Yes, Cousin Anne?"

"Fritz—he loved me. He did indeed. Just me. I shall never forget the little moon trying to shine against that curious Indian evening light. Fritz, he kissed me. And—his buttons hurt my cheeks. And—I told him he was the best and bravest of men, so—of course, I loved him."

There was a long, absolutely unbroken pause.

"At first," she resumed, "it—seemed possible. They were to have made him a duke—and then *he*"—her voice so clearly expressed the difference in pronouns that the young man had no need to put any questions—"*he* found—that it was impossible."

Even her voice seemed to bow to the inevitable in rank and class.

"He"—it meant the lover now—"told me just after we got back to England. It—it—it just couldn't be."

Her little face seemed to have grown old with awful precipitancy, and the young man watched it with reverence. "Poor Anne," he said, "sweet, sweet, brave Anne."

She gave a little broken laugh. "Not brave, my

dear. Only—after all, God *meant* us to be what we are, so—why protest?"

Augustus Frederick rose.

"Suppose I married morganatically," he protested; "what could he do?"

She smiled. "To—you, nothing, my little, little boy cousin. But to her! Who would be her friends? Who would dare—in view of his anger? No, Fritz, you must give it up."

She laid her little thin hands—hot now—on his, but he shook them off in sudden impatience.

"What about—Mrs. Jordan—and the others?"

Princess Anne—poor Anne, of the crooked back, smiled at him—so sadly.

"Dear Freddy boy! You love her so much that no sacrifice could be too great for you to make for her," she declared finally. "You must, you will, think of her."

"But, Anne, she loves me. She does indeed."

"And why not, my dear? You would be for any woman a fine lover! Only——"

Quite suddenly she began to cry. First great tears gathered under her fair lashes; then her eyes half closed, and large, bitter tears gathered and fell. Then, at last, her little, blue-veined hands went to her face and held it close.

"Oh, Fritz—promise me," she grieved. "For *her* sake promise me. Let her love—and respect—your memory. Promise me. He would never consent to one of those dreadful morganatic marriages, never. He hates them, and so does she. Oh, Fritz——"

Into his strong arms he gathered the little agitated creature.

"Anne, dear," he whispered, "I promise. She—you are right, I could not marry her—and there is no alternative. I—I will not see her again."

They stood for a moment hand in hand, their sad eyes, hers still wet, his contracted with pain, looking into each other.

Then he kissed her and went his way.

CHAPTER XIV

"BUT, my dear—who was he?"

Miss Leate smiled, with her smile that had the effect only of baring her pretty teeth.

Maria smiled gravely. "Who was he?" she returned. "Well, he was—a gentleman—didn't you think so, Doris?"

"Ye—es. Only his quite suddenly—just not calling again, seemed strange. And he certainly had a queer bold way of looking at one."

"Yes," Maria agreed seriously.

"And did he say he was not coming to see you any more?"

"He wrote it."

Doris Leate's was one of those faces whose beauty depends chiefly on the temper of their owner.

She was in a thoroughly good mood now, for "the cousin of the present peer" had been impressed by her, and shown it. So, as she leaned toward the other girl, her face full of excited, pleasant curiosity, she was at her prettiest.

The two were sitting in the drawing-room in St. Anne's Terrace; it was raining hard, the temperature had dropped many degrees since the warm morning when "Mr. Frederick" had last called, and the fire

under the crimson velvet mantel-cloth was very comforting.

"Maria, do let me see it!"

Maria laughed. Doris was two years older than she, but she seemed to Maria much younger.

"Why should I show you my letters, Miss Monkey?"

"I won't be called Miss Monkey! And—but why not, as I have the bad taste to be curious? Do show it to me. He—he was awfully fascinating, you know."

"But the letter was to *me*."

Doris was clever, in her small way; she had a gift of managing people by questionable methods; she used flattery often, and often a sort of suggestion.

"Oh, well," she declared, with a toss of her tousled little head, "if it's so very *private!*"

Maria flushed slowly and deeply. Then without a word she rose and went to the writing-table at which Frederick had written her his one love-letter, and took from where it lay on the blotting-book a square envelope which Doris had seen ever since she first came in, although it had not occurred to her to identify it with the note in question.

The note, written on the Marlborough Club paper, read as follows:

> My dear Miss Drello:
>
> On the whole, after what you told me, I had perhaps better not come again to see you. Will you give my kind regards to Mr. Drello and Lurty, and believe me to be, with deepest homage,
>
> A. Frederick.

Doris read it twice. Then she said, with the little sniff that of all human sounds most unmistakably expresses doubt, "H'm! 'Homage'! I call that a funny word, don't you? 'Homage.'"

"A very nice word, I call it."

"Yes, you *would!* But—Oh, Maria, do tell me. Did he propose to you? I swear I won't even tell Lurty."

"Not even Lurty?"

"No."

"And do you tell my brother everything?"

Doris was silent for a moment. She was a creature of tight folds and sharp edges, one could visualize her in the future as a nut-crackery old woman with a bitter tongue and an uncharitable mind. There was in her none of the downy breadth and gentleness that make some women grow more lovable as they age. But she was not a liar.

"N—no," she said slowly. "Not *quite* everything. But I do most things."

Maria, in the midst of her own misery, smiled with great sweetness.

"Do," she advised, "all you can."

"All right, I will, dear, only—*did* he propose to you? You needn't think we didn't all notice the way he looked at you—did he propose?"

Maria Drello's pride was in the dust; she had given her love to this man knowing that he loved her; she had made no mental reservations of any kind; she would, without hesitating, have followed him to the ends of the earth. But she had taken for granted that he wanted her to be his wife, and he had only wanted

her as his mistress. The bitterness of death was in her heart.

She stood motionless by the fire, the letter in her hand, looking at Doris. Doris was a person of not much weight, or consequence of any kind; but she was a woman whose respect for Maria would go up with a bound if she were told that Frederick had proposed.

And the crux was that he had. He had told Maria he loved her, and proposed to her—to be his mistress.

Flattery of any kind, admiration of any kind, would be balm to Maria's sore mind as she stood there. Doris would wonder at Maria's refusal of such a delightful, and to her quite unattainable, man. Doris's very jealousy would be pleasant. Maria was silent for a moment, and then she said slowly, "Yes—he *did* propose to me."

She was ashamed, with bitter shame, the moment the lie had dropped into silence.

Doris exclaimed, Doris conjectured, Doris marveled; and then, finally, Doris decided that a man with eyes like *that* would not give in for one refusal.

"He'll be back inside a month," she prophesied, gaily confident; "and he'll just *make* you say yes. And what you said no for—unless you are waiting for the Prince of Wales," she gushed, "I can't imagine. Hello—there's a ring at the bell. Who on earth can it be? Unless—Oh, Maria—unless it's him!"

Maria frowned. "It is not he," she said coldly. And it was not.

Together the two girls watched the slow progress up the wet flagged path of two strange ladies.

"Who in the world is that guy in gray?" laughed Doris. "Looks like the Fat Woman in a circus."

Their ignorance was not much enlightened when Thimblebee, a moment later, ushered in Miss Fountain and Miss Marveldt.

Miss Fountain was the spokeswoman; a domineering, very fat, oldish lady, with a mouth like a trap, and a heavy gold lorgnon, without which she appeared to be stone blind.

Doris rose, bent, as she always was, on making an impression, even on obviously disapproving old ladies of great girth.

Up went the gold lorgnon. "Miss—Drello?" Miss Fountain asked, gazing at Doris as if she really disliked her intensely.

"I am Miss Drello." Maria's quiet voice had the effect of clearing Miss Fountain's face of its expression of extreme disapproval.

"Ah!—I am Miss Fountain, and—and——"

"And I," put in the other lady, who wore a green, boat-shaped hat, and a veil dotted closely with chenille, "am Miss Marveldt." She bowed, a pretty little bow, nearly, but not quite, shy.

Maria bowed to her and then looked at Miss Fountain.

That lady, having sat down, like her friend, unfastened her gun-metal-colored velvet mantle.

"I am," she began, measuredly, "much interested in the Incurables' Home at Tenterdale-on-Sea. Several ladies have been good enough to help——"

"We are in urgent need of funds—and clothes,"

put in Miss Marveldt, "above all, clothes for the patients."

"Exactly," murmured Miss Fountain firmly, "clothes of all kinds. Would you care to contribute, Miss Drello?"

Maria looked from one to the other. She was puzzled. Puzzled people sometimes maintain silence, affronted ones almost never.

"I shall be delighted to give you two guineas," burst in the altogether neglected Doris. "If you will leave me your address," she added grandly, "I will send you a check."

Miss Marveldt gave a little nervous start.

"Thank you very much," she said. "And—and you, Miss Drello?"

Suddenly Maria's face changed. It seemed to clear, and she said to Doris very gently: "Doris, dear, would you mind allowing me to speak to Miss Fountain alone? There is a fire in my room."

When Doris had marched out in what is known as high dudgeon, and slammed the door, Maria rose, and, passing Miss Fountain, made a low curtsey to Miss Marveldt. "How can I be of use," she said gently, "to your Highness?"

Miss Marveldt gave a deep sigh, and Miss Fountain exclaimed, "I told your Highness it couldn't be done. You are quite right, Miss Drello."

But Maria herself knew just a little of court etiquette from books and by hearsay.

Very gravely she disregarded Miss Fountain, that tyrant of tyrants, formerly poor Princess Anne's gov-

erness. And poor Princess Anne held out a kind and impulsive hand.

"Fritz has told me," she said, "and I was so sorry for you both. I don't quite know why I came, but the chances were you never would know who I was——"

Maria waited.

"You see, he is so much younger than I," the Princess went on, "and I have always been very fond of him."

She paused, and this time her silence was an invitation to Maria to speak, but Maria did not speak because she could not.

Then Miss Fountain went to one of the windows and opened it. "Dear me," she exclaimed briskly, "here's the sun! May I take a look at your irises, Miss—er—Drello?" and she stepped bravely on to the wet grass.

"I am so sorry," Princess Anne murmured again. "Such things are very sad. And Fritz is a dear boy."

Maria smiled faintly. "I knew you couldn't call him Augustus," she said. "It's such a dreadful name! So it's 'Fritz'?"

"Yes. His mother is German, you know. Or perhaps you don't, there are so many of us, and we are so complicated!"

Maria was still standing, and the Princess bade her be seated.

"He is very unhappy," she added; "it is his first real love—but he is very brave."

"Yes. He is not coming here any more."

"I know. He promised me." Then the kind woman

added: "Now that I have seen you, I am sorry it ca
not be."

Maria's hand flew to her face and hid it for a m
ment. As yet she had not cried, day or night, and h
nerves were suffering under the strain.

The Princess rose. "Now I will go. I will tell h
that you, too, are being brave. That—that I belie
you to be, in all but the one thing unfortunately
sential, worthy of him. And," she added, taking t
girl's hand, "I will not ask you not to tell anyone th
I came here. I know that you will not."

Maria curtsied, and the watchful Miss Fountain ca
into the room slowly.

"Believe me," Princess Anne said, in an undertor
"you *can* do it, because it is right, and because a ma
respect is in some cases better than his love. Goo
bye."

CHAPTER XV

AND then came, as always, after a great emotion, days and weeks, and months of steady, dull pain. The sun was very potent that year, and his friendliest and yellowest, and to Maria in Kensington and to Prince Fritz (who had been sent with suspicious suddenness to Germany), his very warmth was traitorous and wounding.

The young man of course kept his word, and Maria would have died rather than have made him a sign of life.

She knew by the papers where he went. "H. H. Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland left yesterday for Berlin, via Ostend"; and "Yesterday Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland arrived in Frankfurt, from Berlin." The poor girl read these scraps of news usually at breakfast. She could by shutting her eyes figure to herself her "Fritz," as she had learned to call him (and Augustus really is impossible), pacing the deck on the trans-channel steamer, his coat collar turned up, his hands plunged in his pockets, on his way to Berlin.

Berlin! Abode to her uninstructed imagination of Army-mad citizens, of beer-and-boiled-beef-fed fat people, of the pomp and circumstance of gold braid and its

adorers. And there was her Fritz—her Fritz, of the blue eyes and the hot kisses, mounted on fine, imperial steeds, looking on at, and even assisting in, great military reviews, and, later, dining in immaculate English evening clothes with Teutonic Royalty, brilliant and potent.

And then, when the summer was over, back he came, the Fritz who should have been hers; sun-burned, a little hollow-eyed from vigils of whose meaning she had no real clear notion, a Fritz full of half confidences from a War lord, full, too, perhaps, in a most beautiful and gentlemanly way, of German beer; a Fritz on whom, according to a cheap but vibrant weekly, a certain high-placed German mother had had the deepest designs.

Maria Drello was a brave woman. She had made her sacrifice, and thereby smiled. But at the thought of the Princess with the stiffly elegant torso and the hair of an unnaturally even wave, she lost patience.

Think, you who read, of the most passionately loving woman of your acquaintance; picture her in the days of her unknowing youth. Of her to her strange pulsing; of her un-understood breathlessness; of the marvelous longings and wishes that to her had no definite goal; of her tremors and dreams; all felt to the hilt and comprehended not a whit. And then you have Maria Drello that hot summer.

She had told no one of Princess Anne's visit. Even the sharp Doris misunderstood, and invested the bulky Fountain with the power she had vaguely felt in the presence of the two ladies.

Quietly Maria had gone on her way, studying her music, learning lists of dates from Schumann's and Schubert's lives, cultivating her understanding of Brahms and Wagner.

And in All Saints' Place the fat Sulzer went on with his lessons, teaching her with all conscientiousness what he knew of the great art of voice production, but hardly, in his wisdom, attempting to interfere with her soul production.

And little slight Barba felt a stone wall grow, as if it were a hedge, between her and her friend, and said nothing.

Unusual, these two women in their word-sparseness. Meantime Tomsk, as the weather grew warmer, found a fan necessary to his comfort under the edge of the piano, behind his screen, and bought himself a pink folding fan with gold-dust sprinkled on it, and a rosy sunset painted thereon, and small grotesque people outlined against the sunset.

And with this fan Tomsk fanned himself, while he listened to the pupils and accrued knowledge, and learned things his own most piteous physical disabilities might otherwise have debarred from him.

In those days Barba wore linen blouses, low at the throat, and the master's coat was of yellow Chinese silk, and very crumpled.

For over four months—from the seventh of May nearly to the end of September—Maria Drello's only consolation (because it was her only work) was her music.

She was a conscientious girl, therefore she worked

at her top speed, but her top speed did not mean a tremendous rapidity of progress.

He continued to teach her to sing, but she learned slowly and sometimes with tears.

Tomsk, too, wept occasionally, because he was a dwarf, and constrained to dwell in a corner behind a screen.

Tomsk's dream of life, besides being Maria's chosen lover, was to be an aëronaut.

He could have flown, the little man, if only—— His whole life was bounded by "if onlys." He was a man of dreams and ideals.

Maria, to him, was only one grade higher than Mr. C. Grahame-White.

But Mr. C. Grahame-White was a happy—even a merry young man, so poor Tomsk was more deeply interested in Maria. And in his corner he thought of her, and wondered, and wondered——

For Maria grew every day paler, and more hollow-eyed. Her beautifully curved lips lost their lovely lift, her ears, as he saw them against the light, were of the color of altar candles. And it followed that every Sunday, in the Russian church, Tomsk, seeing the great candles burning palely, thought of Maria still. She was suffering, he knew.

At home they knew this, too.

Old W. D. wondered, and in his way suffered with her; but he was not a man of courage, and he feared to question her.

His attempts at consolation were ineffective and strange.

He brought her little baskets of particularly immense strawberries which without a word he put at her place at table.

He brought her a huge burnt straw hat with a broad watered silk blue ribbon to tie under her chin.

He gave her a brand new edition of "The Sonnets from the Portuguese."

He took her quite unexpectedly to see Sir Herbert Tree's new play.

He took her once to Greenwich, and insisted on her partaking of inferior whitebait in a horrid hotel dining-room, at a table covered with a cloth spottedly reminiscent of many meals.

He urged her to sing to him in the evenings, when he and she were alone, and the dear faded drawing-room, because of its ghosts, positively a place of horror to her.

Then, one day late in September, she found, while waiting at her dentist's, a certain paragraph in a certain paper.

"We are informed," the editor vaingloriously announced, "that a Royal engagement is very shortly to be announced. The gentleman in question is one of our most popular princes, and the lady (discretion prohibits a greater distinctiveness) one of the loveliest of Continental princesses. Suffice it to say that she is as blonde as ripe corn, and of the highest lineage."

Poor Maria knew. And in the bitter pain of her knowledge she weakened.

On the dentist's paper she wrote, enclosing the cutting, "Is this true?" And she posted it herself.

A week later there came a small, square envelope which she opened at breakfast under Lurty's eye.

"My love—of course it isn't true. Fritz," and for weeks she was in Heaven.

The little note dwelt in her breast and twenty times a day she read it. At least he was not going to be married to a horrid German with yellow hair.

For the present that was enough!

CHAPTER XVI

PRINCESS ANNE was with her august mother in Germany that year from July to the end of September. The old lady suffered from suppressed gout and was extremely fond of those German cures which consist of bubbly baths in the morning and much bath-chair exercise in the afternoons.

So they were to be seen, "the English Royalties," as the proud hotel proprietor called them, the old lady in her bath-chair drawn by a depressed looking young man in livery, poor Anne trotting by her mother's side.

Princess Anne wore expensive but ugly clothes, and sunhats trimmed with flowers. She was fond of what she called a neat waistline, and her hips sprang out more than do most women's hips, because her waist went in more.

She always carried a sunshade to protect her mother's august head from the sun.

"*Ach was,*" the good Germans used to say, staring with the innocent directness of their race, "pretty she is not; nor *sehr elegant,* but she looks *gemütlich*—cosy."

Then they would nod together and assure each other that there was little wonder that the English Princesses looked *gemütlich,* because, as everyone knows, the

English Royal family is absolutely German, some of them not even speaking English.

This belief, together with the one of the British officers with their own imbrued hands seizing by the heels small Boer babies and dashing out their inimical young brains against the walls—these beliefs are deeply embedded in many German breasts, to the great comfort of its middle class!

The good bourgeoise ladies were genuinely sorry for Princess Anne because her mother did not look cosy; also because she herself was so thin.

There was to them little wonder in the fact that she had never "got a man."

In this homely phrase they meant no disrespect. It is a current, and to them inoffensive, one. Meantime, poor Anne led as usual a dull and uncomfortable life.

Her mother was having one of her worst bouts of gout, and while it was suppressed in one way, it certainly was not in another. There was not one detail concerning it that poor Anne was not told a dozen times a day. She was very patient, very sympathetic, very good at remembering.

And she did not know that she was bored. She thought she was homesick!

One day in September there was a Kaiser Maneuver in the neighborhood, and in the evening many of the officers who had taken part in it dined at the Victoria Hotel.

Anne wore a new black gown, and her double row of pearls, and had her little curls arranged with extra care.

For Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland was coming to see her after dinner.

The old Princess went to bed early, grumbling very much at some entirely imaginary deterioration in the service of her dinner, owing to the officers' invasion.

When she was alone, Anne sat by the open window, looking down into the park, brilliantly decorated with Chinese lanterns, and little pink and green lamps looking like ices, that edged all the footpaths.

The very excellent band was braying loudly under its huge gilded sounding-board, and a solid procession of *Familien* and, above all, *Mädchen* marched solemnly up and down, waiting for the heroes to emerge.

The heroes, however, deferred until a late hour their emergence, for they were hungry, and tired, and thirsty.

Anne's little traveling clock struck ten before the flutter in the ambulatory dovecot under her window told her that the warriors, replete, were issuing from the dining-room.

Coyness is, in these our isles, more or less an obsolete vice. Our girls may be roughly classed as either boyishly friendly and simple in their manners toward men, or undistinguishable in their polish and self-contained manner from young matrons.

Italian girls are as a rule trained to be or to appear shy. French girls grow more and more like the English. To the Fatherland belongs the left-over failing of coyness. When the officers came out on to the terrace, some of them joining the promenaders, the girls preened themselves and clung close to their mothers or to each other. They whispered, they giggled, they

glanced at the conquerors, to glance away with much horror at having been seen to glance.

And no other men in the world would have dared show themselves as conscious conquerors, as these warriors did.

Beaux sabreurs, they ogled. No man ogles in England to-day.

And yet some of them were young, some old, some fat and jellylike, some slim and handsome.

They were, under their tight coats, just a lot of men, as well born, as well bred as so many English officers.

Yet how different their manners.

Anne thought of all these things, leaning her face in her thin hands, in her window.

She was glad that Englishmen did not ogle. At least not in shoals.

Presently Miss Fountain came in, followed by Prince Fritz.

"My dear Anne!" He kissed her hands and she examined his face carefully in the electric light the lady in waiting had turned on before leaving the room.

"Hard work?" she asked.

"Rather. A wolf for work. Up before dawn and all that sort of thing."

"You look tired, my dear. And older."

He laughed gaily. "I am nearly three months older than I was the last time I saw you."

"Are you three months wiser?"

He nodded. He looked, she saw, very handsome indeed in his full-dress uniform.

"More than that I hope, little Anne. Wisdom, once

you've called it to you, seems to come by leaps and bounds."

The band was playing a waltz, and she paused a moment to listen, while he whistled softly, keeping time with one foot.

"Fritz—are you really happy?"

He stopped whistling and, rising, leaned against the window, looking down at her.

"To every one I know, except you," he declared gravely, "I am Prince Fritz—the merry, foolish, extravagant Prince Fritz. But not to you, Anne. To you—well, in plain English, I want my girl."

"I am so sorry."

"Thank you. It's—don't you think," he amended, "it's queer that I just can't forget her? Why, I only saw her four times! But I can remember every little thing about her, even the way her hair doesn't wave straight back, but curves down toward her ears—and a curious sudden drop there is in her voice——"

"If," asked Princess Anne slowly, "she had not been good, and had—gone to Paris, say, with you——"

He flushed, for one of his earliest escapades had been to Paris with a gay peeress, and some of the ha'penny papers had had much to say about the matter.

"Yes, Anne?"

"Well, if she hadn't been good, you'd have forgotten all about her by this time!"

"No. I—I can only say that I am glad she was good, but—well, it was different from the beginning."

His face was very serious.

After a pause, "Of course the little one would have gone," she burst out incoherently.

"The little one?"

"Yes. Her friend—Oh, dear me," she broke off, "I've told you and I never meant to. Never!"

"But what?" He was bewildered.

Finally she confessed, telling her story badly but circumstantially.

"And you were there, in that drawing-room! You and Miss Fountain!"

"Yes, you see, Freddy, I knew I oughtn't to go. I hadn't the ghost of an excuse—except just—just your poor face."

He bent and kissed her. "Dear Anne!"

Presently he asked: "When was it?"

"The day after. The day after you told me. At first I thought I'd tell you I went," she resumed, "but there didn't seem much use. All she said was just—that you weren't coming any more, and all I could say was—well——"

She broke off, while the band burst into the Pilgrims' March.

"Anne, dear—what did you say?" the young man insisted gently.

He closed the window, by that simple procedure apparently removing the pilgrims to the next kingdom, so suddenly did their march seem to die into distance.

"Anne—dear."

She looked up at him, her prominent, light eyes filling with tears that made them look oddly incandescent.

"I said—that I was sorry it—was impossible!"

There was a long pause while those pilgrims marched gravely on, leaning, one knew, on long sticks like shepherds' crooks.

"Thank you," Prince Augustus Frederick said quietly. "I am glad you said that. Was it all you said?"

"I—I don't quite remember; but I know I told her we called you Fritz."

"What did she say to that?"

Princess Anne laughed and dried her eyes. "She said she had been sure we couldn't call you—Augustus," she confessed.

He laughed quietly. "Well, I thank you for going," he declared, "and still more for telling her you were sorry. As for me—the War Lord has a matrimonial plan for me, a pretty, fattish mädchen—a grand ducal father and a good deal of money. My mother has written to urge me to do it, which of course put me off."

"You ought to marry some day, Freddy."

"Of course. Except that there are something like twenty lives, thank God, between me and—the throne."

"But, surely you would be happier married, and—I may as well tell you that I know who your fattish mädchen is. She's a thoroughly nice girl, Fritz, and of good, sound stock."

He looked at her with a quizzical look in his blue eyes.

"Are you seriously advising me to marry one woman when every bit of me loves another?"

"Oh, no, Freddy, dear. Not yet, of course, but you

aren't seeing Miss Drello, so you will forget her in the course of time."

"Never," he declared gloomily. "Of course I'll marry eventually—if only because I love children—but—if I saw Maria Drello after thirty years' absence, I should love her just as much as ever. And you," he added, kissing her curls in adieu, "you can't say that that is a pose. It's just a thing that is in some people, and isn't in others. And it is in you and me, Anne."

CHAPTER XVII

THE smallness of the bases of some tremendous edifices of love, hatred, jealousy, or fear is a matter on which one can ponder.

For over forty years there had existed a bitter, enduring feud between their respected Highnesses, the Duchess of Zeeland and Princess Adalbert of Mönnichfeldt, Princess Anne's mother.

The Duchess was German by birth, whereas Princess Adalbert was nearly a full-blooded Briton.

Only two or three people in the world were old enough, or interested enough, to remember how the two ladies had quarreled—in 1866.

And it was all about a wreath of pink roses which, at a ball at the house of a great Duke, the young German matron had worn, perched rather perilously on her well-brilliantined, straight hair.

The English bride laughed at the wreath which had slipped to one side, the German heard her, and—that was all.

In the years immediately succeeding to the ball, there had been rumors about the enmity; there were those who declared it had a political significance; then there were other tales, equally untrue, of a liking one

of the young husbands had had for the other young wife.

And as time went on and the brides developed into maturity, middle-age, and then old age, the hatred remained, though it is possible that either of them might have been hard put to it to describe the original quarrel. Slowly, incident by incident, had grown up the hatred that was now, to each in her old age, one of her strongest emotions.

They were not so charming as the women related to the reigning house usually are.

Princess Adalbert's chief preoccupation was, to tell the truth, her food; the Duchess's a hard, unpleasant, meddling kind of charity. And either of them, at the mention of the other's name, flamed with bitter curiosity and revengefulness.

One day in late October these things presented themselves to Princess Anne in a new light.

For the first time she saw that the enmity might be utilized.

As a destructive watercourse may, confined and controlled, be sent to fine uses, so, Princess Anne began to see, her mother's very hatred of the little old Duchess might be made use of.

One is sorry to say that this idea came to the gentle little lady at church, as she sat very smart and upright by the imposing Miss Fountain. Princess Anne said her prayers frantically, trying her honest best to postpone her mental investigation of her phenomenal discovery until after the service, but she could not.

Two evenings before, at a play, she had chanced to

see Maria Drello sitting in the stalls with her father, and the sight of the girl's curiously arrested, smitten-looking face had started her thinking.

Then on the Saturday she had lunched with her Aunt, as she called the Duchess, who in reality was more of a cousin, and there she had learned sad news; it appeared that Augustus Frederick had been misbehaving.

He had been spending too much money, his mother informed her. And—there was—a girl. A girl of the horridest qualities. A girl who, to gain a certain modicum of her living, danced in scant attire at the Folies Bergères, and was at the moment polluting by her Gallic presence the chaste domestic atmosphere of one of the Leicester Square Music Halls.

"I shall speak about it to the King," the old lady thundered. "It must be stopped."

"But—can it?" Princess Anne plucked nervously at her gloves. It seemed to her that no one, not even Majesty itself, could prevent a young man's being a young man. This, however, she did not dare to say to her outraged kinswoman.

"Dear Freddy," she murmured. "He isn't very old, Aunt Maria, is he?"

"He is seven and twenty. When his dear father was seven and twenty he was not disgracing himself in this way."

Even poor Anne had heard rumors regarding the scandalousness of her late highly respected uncle, but she dared not answer beyond murmuring that she feared poor Fritz wasn't happy.

She left soon after, with a kiss on her cheek from

her mother's enemy, who had always wanted and never had a daughter, and who in her way loved poor Anne.

Thus it was that in church the next day came poor Anne's great idea. . . . It came rawly, as great ideas do.

"*Mamma would, of course, help Fritz in order to get back at Aunt Maria.*"

Slowly the idea shaped itself into greater delicacy, and, feeling extremely guilty, she played with it.

"I needn't do it, of course," her guilty mind went on, "but if I did tell Mamma! She'd know how furious Aunt Maria would be. And then, because of that business about Alicia, he might listen to Mamma. He is always very good to Mamma.

"I wonder if he ever *would* allow it. I hardly suppose so. Still, Cousin Osbert did. At all events," she decided, "it's worth trying. It isn't as if Fritz were a near relation—and I can't have him going about with horrid women wearing nothing but ropes of pearls."

She met the young man at a party within the next day or two, and his changed aspect troubled her.

He avoided talking with her, which hurt her, and in his sunken eyes was a sidelong look new to them.

"Fritz," she said suddenly, under cover of some music, "have you seen her?"

He frowned impatiently. "Not to speak to. I keep my promises, Anne."

But she did not mind his annoyance.

"When did you see her?"

"At a play."

"So did I. She looks ill. You do, too."

At the unchanged kindness in her voice, he bit his lips to still a sudden tremor. "I am unhappy," he returned briefly, "hush—we must listen to the singing."

But when the singing was over the little princess in the pale blue brocade dress took his arm and drew him into a fairly empty room.

"Fritzchen—is it real love?"

He nodded, his lips tightening.

"Yes."

"Then why—do horrid things?"

He laughed roughly, as he had never before laughed at her. "When will women ever learn anything about men? You insult—Maria—although you don't mean it, when you mention her in the same breath with Fifi Letruc. They have nothing whatever to do with each other."

"But they have with you," she persisted.

He looked at her sweet, worn, anxious face.

"Fritz—I have been thinking. Do you remember about Cousin Osbert?"

"Yes. Why on earth talk about him?"

"Because—Oh, I can't bear to have you unhappy. You remember about him? He became the Earl of Canrobert. They were very happy." She gave the bare facts without any context.

He nodded, kindly this time. "I see what you mean, dear, but—it's no use. You know it. You yourself persuaded me that he would never allow it."

"Fritz—his father allowed Osbert to!"

"Yes. But his father was different, and I am different from poor Cousin Osbert. I am even useful, in a

way—as a kind of superior footman," he added bitterl
"No, Anne, it's no good. I must just get over it
best I can. And—you mustn't blame me if some of m
methods shock you. They are—men's methods, dear

"Men's methods," she answered, with a dryness u
usual to her, "don't seem to be making you ve
happy!"

His face relaxed and he smiled down at her. "Po
Anne," he said, "how wise you are! No—they nev
do."

CHAPTER XVIII

BARBARA GRYCE did not live with her illustrious uncle. She had a little flat in a vast new building near Russell Square, a beehive of a place whose roof sheltered nearly a thousand souls.

It was an ugly, new, red brick edifice called in the new way "mansions"—a misnomer that must, one feels, in those moments of acute sensitiveness with inanimate things that come to people who live less by thinking than by feeling, be offensive to old-fashioned houses that really are mansions. They must feel as trained nurses do when they see uneducated, vulgar nurse maids dressed in nurses' uniforms.

Or did some imaginative builder first thus name one of these hives after reading the fourteenth chapter of St. John? At all events in Glanvil Mansions there were something over two hundred little homes, and the lonely Barbara liked feeling this.

She liked to think, as she sat at her own humble supper (cooked by herself in a kitchen that would have been considered too small as a cage by any self-respecting parrot), "now they are all eating; two hundred little tables, two hundred little groups of people, tired, and hungry, and glad to get home."

Even the solitaries like herself seemed to consti-

tute a group at meal time. Cats, dogs, and birds are cheap.

Perhaps she was, in the vast building, the only soul who had no companion of any kind.

And this was not because she did not love animals, for she did, but every day of her life she left home at eight to make her way to her uncle's house, to return after the last lesson, which ended at six. How could she take care of any living creature?

On Sundays she went to see various friends, or had what she called little small parties at home.

One Sunday in November the little woman was giving one of these *feste*.

There was throughout the wee flat a delectable smell of roasting meat, and the dining-table (by the sitting-room fire) was decorated with a bunch of yellow chrysanthemums, while on a small table in the far window stood a large bowlful of lettuce and a plate on which reposed four meringues.

There was also a small flask of Chianti in its straw cage, and a quite new Camembert cheese. And covers were laid for two.

Barbara, in a wide pinafore of a shade of red dear to the German half of her soul, came in from the kitchen just as the bell rang, and went straight to the door.

"How do you do," she said, with a cordial lack of originality, "I am very glad to see you."

The man's voice that answered her was deep and rather musical, and supposing that an unseen listener had followed the conversation, he would have heard much laughter, much talking, much of the intentional

joviality of those who are allowed by their worldly circumstances to be jovial only once a week.

"Tomato salad," the man exclaimed, with real delight, "and at this time of the year."

"Well, to tell you the truth, there are only three tomatoes," Barbara returned, "but they were beauties, very big, and very firm—not the nasty foreign ones that are all juice and seeds."

Now, it so happened that the walls of these mansions were very thin, so thin that the sound of voices passed through them as if they were paper.

Moreover, little Barbara's one enemy dwelt at Number 119, and her own flat being 120, it followed that the sitting-rooms of the two homes were next to each other.

Miss Priscilla Pendleton, the enemy, was a young lady of a vast theatrical and music hall list of friendships. She had, it transpired from her conversation, no mere acquaintances, they were all friends. Great dears, real loves, lambs, ducks, utterly precious, all of them.

And some of these enchanting beings having on two occasions made music in the flat until 5:30 A. M., poor, tired Barbara had, on her uncle's advice, complained to the manager.

Result, a reprimand and an efficacious warning to Miss Pendleton, and from her to Barbara a highly sincere, very voluble dislike.

There were a thousand ways in which Miss Pendleton could annoy her neighbor, and she neglected no one of them.

Barbara bore it all in silence, and even without great

grief, until one day her neighbor, quite by chance, hit her on the raw, and sent her trembling back from the landing.

"I hope my gentlemen friends aren't too noisy for you *now*, Miss Price," the wide-eyed, yellow-haired actress exclaimed, putting her key into the keyhole. "I suppose one reason why you didn't like the row was that you never have any gentlemen callers yourself."

She felt none of the thrills of triumph, for, so far as she knew, the quiet-voiced Barbara might have had dozens of men friends during the evening hours while she herself was earning her living by the exiguous labor known as "walking on."

But Barbara was cut to the quick, because, as a matter of fact, she had no men friends.

She was, in the first place, not pretty, and, in the second, whom could she have had?

Her duties at Sulzer's, as far as the pupils were concerned, were restricted to a polite "good morning" or "good afternoon," and the male pupils never noticed her beyond giving her the necessary answer.

She had met several young men at the Drellos', but she was too shy to talk much in company, and her shyness was of a kind that irritated old William, so that he rarely allowed his daughter to invite her when other people were coming.

He could not help his almost fierce dislike of the little unconscious mannerisms that all shy people have, and he had, which so often happens to those possessed of the charm that makes so many men and women abso-

lutely fearless, an unjust dislike and scorn of those cursed with its lack.

So no man ever came to 120 Glanvil Mansions, and of this fact Barbara was silently ashamed.

But on that day she was merry and unconstrained, she laughed much more than usual, and louder, and, as her guest grew merrier, she glanced often toward Miss Pendleton's abode.

Surely Miss Pendleton could hear.

Now, as it chanced, Barbara's guest had a very carrying voice, and he had, as well, a pretty taste for Chianti.

So presently Miss Pendleton, stretched on her sofa, ill with toothache, decided that she must see who that little duffer had managed to lure to her dull cave.

Miss Pendleton ruffled her hair, pinched her cheeks to make them rosy, and, slipping on a pink tea gown which she had recently bought "off" a friend in temporary difficulties, she crossed the landing and rang Barbara's bell.

Barbara paled and rose. "Oh!" she cried, "I'm sure it's my neighbor—such a horrid girl—will you—will you just sit—there?" indicating her own chair, which was out of eyeshot from the door. "If she knows I have a gentleman to lunch, she'll insist on coming in."

He laughed. "What if she does? The more the merrier," he declared. "Impossible to have too many lovely women about, I say."

Barbara glanced in disdain at him as he grasped the Chianti bottle. His black eyes were quite bold enough as it was.

"Ting-g-g-g-g——"

Miss Pendleton would, she knew, ring for an hour if no one opened the door.

So Barbara went.

"Oh, how d'ye do?" said Miss Pendleton in a languorous voice. "I just thought I'd awsk you to awsk your friend not to laugh quite so loud! I've got neuralgia very badly."

As she spoke she peered curiously past Barbara into the sitting-room, but she could see nothing.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Barbara returned hurriedly. "I'm very sorry. We'll be quite quiet."

The other girl put her foot against the door.

"Was I dreaming again?" she paraphrased. "Surely I *did* hear a man's voice."

"You did," the voice answered, musically; "but I shall speak lower in future."

And from his chair, as she could now see in a mirror, down scrambled Tomsk, advancing to her with a conquering, blissful, six-foot air, that was due, alas, to the forgetfulness of realities found by the poor little man in the Chianti flask.

He wore a pink shirt highly starched—he was extremely particular about the glaze on his shirts—a spotted blue and white tie, a frock coat given to him by a friend, which in the remodeling had been left so long that under it appeared only about three inches of brown and white check trousers and new yellow shoes as highly glazed as his shirts.

Tomsk had forgotten that he was a dwarf, he realized only that a large and lovely lady with mimosa-

colored hair was inquiring about him. Gaily, with pathetic hardihood he advanced.

And she, looking down at him, drew back at first almost as if frightened, and then burst into loud, brutal laughter.

Barbara tried to close the door, but Miss Pendleton's foot prevented her, and the rough mirth, somehow almost obscene in its cruelty, filled the stone staircase.

"But whatever *is* it?" shrieked the lady whose deep ambition was to play *Juliet* and *Desdemona*. "Is it a man or a baboon?"

Tomsk gave a queer, low, grating cry, something really almost less than human.

Then he rushed at his insulter, still making uncouth sounds in his throat.

Catching her round the waist he doubled her forward so that he could lift her.

This he did, one of his white hands buried in her flowing silk garments, the other closing like a vice round her wrists. Then he approached the handrail and bundled her up to it, and over it, so that she hung over the well of the staircase.

"I am a baboon, am I?" he said, suddenly very quiet. "Well, down you go, baboon fashion."

He was so short that with all his strength it was very hard for him to hold her, but slowly he started down the echoing stairs, creeping close to the rail, his frock coat sweeping the dust.

Barbara followed him, begging him not to hurt the half-fainting woman.

"Hurt her? I'm going to gouge her eyes out," he answered. "She called me a baboon."

Slowly, slowly, without meeting a soul he crept down the three hundred stone steps, Barbara beside him.

When they had reached the ground floor he dropped her roughly and rang the porter's bell. When the porter emerged from his room Tomsk pointed to the woman who had now really fainted.

"Take her upstairs," he ordered harshly; "she's drunk."

CHAPTER XIX

ONE evening, just on the edge of December, Maria, having sung very badly, left All Souls' Place determined to walk home.

It was one of those evenings that seem to have strayed from the country into London by mistake; there was a touch of frost in the air, the dry stones rang under hoofs and heels, and there was no mud.

The lights, that paradoxically seem to bring night to the place where evening awaits it, were not lit in the quiet street; but when she turned into the King's Road she stood still for a moment, blinded by the glare.

It was noisy with the queer, heavy animation that comes to an English crowd when it is being offered unusual opportunities for buying meat.

It seemed a place of butchers' shops, and in the cold air the flames of the torches grew into points as they do in classical pictures.

Women with few teeth, many of them wearing on their frowzy heads the flat cloth cap that would turn a Venus into a slut, chaffed with men of meat in gory aprons.

Children swarmed, wiping little noses on anybody's sleeves, tallow-faced babies slept stertorously in shawls.

And even in the clear air was noticeable the stale smell of poor people.

Maria made her way through the crowd with ease, for she was flexible and well set on her feet.

She had a liking for the old thoroughfare on a Saturday night, but of late all her likings seemed to be in a way dimmed.

It was as if someone had breathed on the mirror of her impressions, dulling it.

To-night she was tired as well, for, to her great surprise, Miss Leate had really decided to marry Lurty, and the wedding was to be on the following Monday.

It seemed to her that she had been working very hard of late, and she was beginning to realize that the wedding itself would be a great ordeal.

It was so long, so long since she had lain awake one night dreaming of her own wedding, that it hardly appeared possible that that was why she so dreaded Lurty's, and yet——. Sometimes she thought she had forgotten Prince Fritz, sometimes she hated him, sometimes she knew that she was one of the unfortunate women who cannot forget.

Twice she had seen him since they parted, once at the play, on the occasion of which he had spoken to Princess Anne; once in a state procession, when he was riding, and when he had not seen her.

To-day she had undergone the final fitting of her bridesmaid's dress, and, for some reason, all her misery was surging up again as if someone had stirred her soul with a large spoon.

Lurty and Doris, full of their new life, had spared

her nothing. Twice she had had to go and see their flat in Knightsbridge, and during two long afternoons she had helped old Mrs. Leate unpack wedding gifts.

Mrs. Leate had lost four children older than Doris, and was very unhappy at the prospect of living all alone.

"Never mind, Mum," Doris assured her generously, "Maria will often come and stay with you, won't you, Maria?"

And Maria, unable to hurt her old friend, had been obliged to promise.

Even this minor ill came to the young woman's memory as she paused in front of a peculiarly sanguinary-looking butcher's shop, while two would-be purchasers of the female sex quarreled vociferously over a piece of Canterbury lamb. Her father was worried, she knew, about money, for Mrs. Crossfield flatly refused to allow him to sell her husband's letters because (old W. D. suspected) they contained not flattering enough references to her.

Lurty had demanded and received from his father's modest capital enough seriously to hamper the old man in his extravagant but innocent tastes.

"No more Pontet Canet for this old dog," he had said to his daughter only that morning, "and no more John Cotton tobacco." He had said it laughingly, having in reality a rather touching belief in his luck, but Maria did not laugh. She had quarreled with her brother on the subject, reproaching him with his selfishness, but Lurty had stood firm.

"You'll never marry," he said, not without a touch

of malice, "and this house will always be a home for you. You and he ought to be able to get on very comfortably——"

"How do you know," she asked, regarding him gravely, "that I shall never marry?"

"Oh, I only meant——"

"Why do you think I never will?" she repeated. He edged toward the door, made uneasy, as he had of late learned to be, by her eyes, when she what he called glared at him.

"Lurty," she called sharply, "don't be a coward. Tell me what you mean?"

At bay, he turned. "Only that—well, Doris and I both thought you liked that chap Frederick——"

She had not answered him, but now even this trifle rose up in her mind to help her be miserable and hopeless.

"If," she reflected, reaching her corner and waiting to cross the road, "I could only marry Sir Hubert. If I had any sense, I suppose I should! Only—I *haven't* any sense!"

Hubert Ballington was a man she had met through some friends of Doris. A country baronet of fairly good lineage, he was a rather charming widower with a half-grown son, and a great deal of money.

He was a reddish man, with a bald head just blurred over with little copper-colored curls.

He had asked Maria on two occasions to become Lady Ballington, but did not seem overwhelmed by grief at her refusal. In short, one of those comfortable, useful adorers, who can go on adoring for years, and then

often, just as their persistence is beginning to soften the heart of the lady, suddenly marry someone else, and be regretted by her for the rest of his life!

A delightful man, although he liked Mendelssohn's music, and went to sleep over Debussy's. Maria had long wished she could marry him, but—she couldn't.

"Terrible Battle in the Balkans," the newsboys were calling out. The girl looked at the placards. The words meant thousands of deaths, the misery and desolation of hundreds of thousands of women and children.

Why was the human mind so constituted that tragedy on this huge scale meant nothing to her, there in London, and her own little troubles seemed to loom up and obscure the very sky?

She tried resolutely for a few moments to make herself feel how each of the fallen soldiers left at least one woman whose life would be ruined by his death. A mother or a wife—or even a poor, incomplete, nameless thing such as she herself was.

Yet she could not sense the suffering of those distant women who wore, presumably, red and blue embroidery on their aprons, and green caps on their heads.

To her, Maria Drello was, realized, the very center of the universe, and God was an unjust man because He (in whom she believed absolutely, if irrationally) would not allow her to marry a man in whose veins ran some of the same blood that ran in the veins of the King.

Perhaps, she thought, harshly, Barbara had been right, when she told her that she, Maria, was growing hard. She certainly *felt* hard.

All her way home the newsboys' cries about the great and—some said—decisive battle in the East struck her ears without quite reaching her mind.

Things nearer and more poignant, even without counting her longing for Fritz, were her father's money troubles, Lurty's selfishness toward the joyous old spendthrift, the ordeal of the wedding, the very unsatisfactory condition of her voice, which Sulzer had told her bluntly, a day or two before, was losing ground.

Nothing seemed right to her.

Tall, beautiful, pale, as she usually was now, she made her way homeward.

It grew colder and her little mink muff was a comfort.

Just as she reached her father's house the moon came out behind the bare boughs of a tree where a bit of fluffy cloud had hidden it.

It was a quite new moon.

Looking hastily to right and to left, she made three little inconspicuous curtsies, and, as she rose from the third, a uniformed child approached her out of the shadow.

"Name of Drello?" he asked, holding up a yellow envelope.

"Yes, thanks."

She took it, pushed open the garden gate, and, in the light streaming from the windows next door, read the telegram, which bore her full name.

Beloved, something wonderful has happened. I will come this evening. FRITZ.

CHAPTER XX

"MY dear Maria," Mr. Fazackerley declared, in the middle of dinner, "what delightful secret are you keeping from us? You look like a garden of red and white roses in a high wind!"

To hide her confusion she bent her head low over her plate, but the hurrying, scurrying waves of color that had caused the old actor's remark dyed the beautiful shoulders, and lost themselves in the waves of her hair.

Ever since she had read the telegram she had been flushing thus, even while hurriedly dressing for the dinner-party, which she had quite forgotten during the day; for a long time she had been nearly free from what was at once her chief charm and her greatest torment, and now it had come back.

It was as if a lake, long somber under lowering leaden clouds, were suddenly flooded with rose-colored light.

But to her it was only an uncomfortable phenomenon whose return was the only drawback to the glorious happiness whose flaunting signal it was.

Fazackerley, pleased with his simile, repeated it:

"Yes, yes, a rose garden blown about by the wind —and what," he added, pertinaciously, his old face in the soft light looking young, "has happened?"

Everyone looked at her, and her eyes filled with the hot, vexatious tears of sheer confusion.

But she could not lie about this one thing, intrusive as they all were. She felt, superstitiously, that to lie would be to risk the loss of her happiness.

"I can't tell you—yet," she said slowly. "In fact, I don't quite know myself——"

"Nonsense," laughed Doris, knowingly. "Lurty and I could make a pretty good guess, if we wanted to, couldn't we, Lurty?"

Lurty nodded. He was resplendent in his second suit of dress clothes, which he felt really *fit*.

"We could," he assented, "but you needen't be afraid, old girl, we *won't*."

She raised her slow-moving eyes to his, and there was gratitude in them.

For a moment the young man saw her as other young men must see her, and he drew a deep breath of pride in his sister, before he again bent an adoring gaze on his fiancée.

It was a small dinner, only Mrs. and Miss Leate; old Fazzy and his Jacqueline, and his Jacqueline's son, who was to be Lurty's best man.

W. D. was rather silent. He was not sorry to lose his son, but he had an instinctive aversion from Doris, and, moreover, he had a headache.

The dinner must be gone through with, nevertheless, and he did his best.

Suddenly, by one of his inspirations of blunder, he leaned forward and said to his son: "By the way, Lurty, I trust you haven't forgotten to send an invita-

tion to that charming friend of yours—young—let me see, his name wasn't Williams? No, nor Johns, nor Thomas——"

With absolute serenity he would have gone through the whole list of masculine Christian names that sometimes appear as surnames, but Doris interrupted him, her eyes fixed on Maria.

"You don't mean Mr. Frederick," she declared with her irritating little air of being clever, when she wasn't.

Again Maria's color surged, but she continued to look straight at Doris, who had caught her eye.

"Ah, yes," she answered, while her father confounded himself in humorous execration of his own stupidity. "A. Frederick I believe his name was." A self-possession that was a revelation to herself was suddenly hers.

"But did you ask him, Lurty?" the old man insisted.

No, Lurty hadn't.

And, when pressed for a reason, he was forced to admit that he did not know his friend's address.

Pretty old Mrs. Crossfield was sorry. The young man, she declared, was very distinguished, and he had delightful, though rather peculiar, manners.

Young Crossfield, on the contrary, had not liked Mr. Frederick's manner. "Interruptious, I call him," he said. "And he seemed to consider that Miss Drello sang only for him."

"I did," remarked Maria, smiling at the sideboard.

Everyone stared, but she repeated her statement with that joy in non-explanation that comes to a person achieving it for the first time.

Perhaps of all the powers it is the one the least appreciated; certainly it is by women.

"Too bad," Doris murmured, "that he did not seem to understand the honor better. He never came after sending you that strange note, did he?"

"No."

Maria, now divested of all fear, smiled at her feline little sister-to-be.

"No doubt," put in Fazackerley, in haste, "he—went away——"

"Stayed away," corrected Maria, transferring her smile, which seemed to everyone present to be a quite new smile, to him.

Old W. D. then settled the matter in the way that had once so delighted Whistler; by a commonplace uttered in the manner of an oracle.

"No doubt," he said, weightily, his eyelids dropping with magnificence, "he had his reasons."

Mrs. Leate nodded. "You're quite right, Mr. Drello," she agreed, "that's exactly what I always say. Don't I, Doris?"

"You *do*, mamma. Always," her daughter returned, in a way that nearly made Lurty burst out laughing. He was not intelligent enough to see that his bride's acerbity, hitherto vented on her mother, would in the future need another victim.

If young men did perceive this truth with greater frequency there would be more old maids in these realms.

Then Doris shot her little shaft.

"I wonder," she said, to Lurty, "if he ever *will* turn up again."

Maria blushed, and paused, obviously until the wave of crimson had receded.

At last she said quietly: "He is coming here this evening."

It was two hours later when the much discussed young man did appear.

Old Mrs. Leate had gone home, for the reason that she always felt that night air was damper than day air.

Otherwise the party was the same, except for the addition of Sir Hubert Ballington.

When the bell rang Mrs. Crossfield, her son, old Drello, and Fazackerley were playing bridge, Doris and Lurty had gone to the library to look at some newly arrived present, and Maria and Ballington sat by the piano.

She had refused to sing, but she felt the need of being near the piano. It seemed to her a friend, and one of her long hands lay on the keyboard.

As the sound of the piano died away, Doris and Lurty came hurrying back to the drawing-room and stood just inside the door as if they were expecting something unusual to happen.

After a short interval this happened. Thimblebee, her face crimson, her wink more ribald than ever, announced in a strained, husky voice:

" 'Is 'Ighness Prince Augustus Zeeland."

"Mr. Frederick" stood for a moment on the threshold.

Being human, he doubtless enjoyed his effect; being a Highness, he as certainly was glad to be received by these small folk as his rank deserved.

But, to do him, as a lover, justice, there is as little doubt that he was proud thus to do honor to the woman he loved.

He walked quickly to her, prevented her courtesy, and, bending his head over her hand, kissed it.

That was his declaration to the world.

CHAPTER XXI

THE next day Princess Anne of Mönnichfeldt, in her high sitting-room inaccessible to her mother, had a tea party. There were only three guests, but it was a most beautiful party.

To do it honor the kind Princess Anne put on a new frock, a frock of a peculiarly ugly slate gray, trimmed with ornaments of silk and steel applied on a ground of white.

And there were wonderful cakes, and coffee as well as tea, and whipped cream, in a jug, in the French way; and on a side-table a bottle of the most excellent Scotch whiskey, and a syphon whose label proclaimed the fact that its makers were patronized by royalty.

There were flowers all over the room, and on the edge of the tea tray, hidden from everyone but the hostess herself, there was a small crimson leather box adorned by a gilt garland.

When William Drello and his daughter arrived, the old man's appearance and manner impressed the gentle princess, for he was indeed a gorgeous old fellow, and he knew just how often to say ma'am without being a bore.

As to Maria, Princess Anne kissed her quite simply, and told her she was so glad.

With all her simplicity, however, she told her guests nothing of her wire-pulling; of the wicked way in which she had hinted to her mother the story of Prince Fritz's unequal attachment; of how she had then, with skill that seemed to her to be positively satanic, agreed with her mother that it would never do.

"Poor Aunt Maria," she had added, "it would break her heart."

Princess Adalbert smiled slowly, and made a remark in German to the effect that she could, for her part, endure the sight of the heart-breaking with some equanimity.

Then days passed, and one evening the old lady, playing with her lapdog, a creature as plethoric and short-breathed as she herself, asked her daughter suddenly, "And Fritz?"

"Oh, he is not seeing the girl. You see, if he did marry her, his mother would simply die of the shock."

Anne, in her duplicity, trembled as she plied the ivory knitting needles with which she was making some little shoes for a forthcoming small royalty.

"*He* would never allow it, either," she added, after a pause.

Princess Adalbert shrugged her shoulders.

"It has been done," she returned. "Is she a lady?"

"She is. And a good, modest girl. Fritz says," she added hastily, "that she is."

"H'm! Of course he would not make him a duke. But he might make him an earl."

Anne looked up, her pale blue eyes luminous.

"But, mother dear, surely *you* don't advocate morganatic marriages."

Princess Adalbert was as illogical and biased in her own favor as any other old lady with a vast appetite and no digestion to speak of.

"There have been exceptional cases," she rumbled, in her deepest voice. "Your cousin Osbert, for example, and Fritz is only a third cousin—and besides, it need not be morganatic at all, if Fritz became an earl——"

"Oh, yes," Anne agreed, softly.

There were many difficulties to be got over; there always are in such cases; but there were two things in the lover's favor, his own distance from the throne, and the irreproachable character of the girl he wished to marry.

That he would by marrying her lose many privileges is indisputable; and it is as indisputable that he loved these privileges. He must become a simple earl, he would lose his "Sir" as well as his "Highness," and there were many other things that would be no longer his.

His love, however, was real, so that these trifles became sincerely negligible to him, and some of the most highly placed men and women in the world saw this, and, being kind, were glad.

And thus the days ran by until that one came when the young man sent his telegram to his love, and then appeared at her father's house invested, to do her honor, with all his little greatness.

At the tea party, a few days later, Princess Anne, in

her new frock, was very kind and very hospitable. Old Drello, who was a gentleman, and had known many of the mentally great men of his time, delighted her.

He was simple, dignified, and becomingly grateful for her interest in his daughter's happiness. "She has been very unhappy all these months, ma'am," he said once, while Maria had wandered purposely to a distant window, where she stood as much out of earshot as the size of the room allowed.

"I am sure she was. And so was my cousin."

He nodded. "It was strange, the way His Highness met my boy—has he told you?—on a bus, it was. And I imagine that that day in the abbey it must have been pretty well what we used to call 'love at first sight.' "

"Don't we call it that now, Mr. Drello?"

They smiled at each other. "Well, ma'am, I suppose we do. A good place for the young people to fall in love, too, wasn't it? The Abbey."

"A very good place." Then she told the old man exactly what the marriage would mean for his daughter; that she would be an English Countess, but not a Highness. That her children would be simply Viscount, Ladies and Honorables. That she would never be *persona grata* at court, or even have a particularly enviable position in society.

"I don't think that will trouble her," he put in just a little too quickly, at which Princess Anne only smiled.

"My mother, Princess Adalbert of Mönnichfeldt, you know," she went on, "is on Fritz's—on our side—and wishes to see—Maria. She is not well, and will not ask you to go to her to-day."

He bowed. "And—is—His—Highness—coming here to-day?"

"Yes, oh yes, indeed. I expected him before now—there he comes!"

There was a delightful, exciting, clinking sound on the stones of the passage, and in came Prince Fritz in full uniform, a gallant and inspiring sight.

He apologized for being late; for not having changed (for fear of being later), and then he took his girl in his arms and kissed her.

"Oh—Fritz!"

"Maria, my beautiful red and white girl, I love you, and my cousin and your father are welcome to hear me say it," he rattled on, kissing her again, until Princess Anne had pity on her blushes and bade him be good.

They drank tea, and ate little cakes, and, finally, just before the rather dreaded visit to Princess Adalbert was undertaken, Maria was presented with the red leather case.

In it lay a kind of plaque, in platinum, with a very complicated A. S. in diamonds, surmounted by a small crown.

"Anne Sophia, that's my name, you see," the kind giver explained. "I wanted it to be your first gift from one of *us*. You will wear it, won't you?"

Then she kissed Maria again, and bade her not to be afraid of Princess Adalbert, who, she added, "has been on your side from the first, and said a great deal in your favor to *him*."

When the two had gone, and old Drello had been accompanied to a room downstairs, where she told him

to wait for his daughter, Princess Anne sat down by the fire and poked it thoughtfully.

Then after a while she drew up from under her collar a small gold locket, which she opened.

She sat in the firelight for a long time, looking at what the locket contained.

CHAPTER XXII

CERTAIN weekly papers were the only ones that dared refer to the projected marriage.

They not only referred to it; with the splendid daring of their kind, they printed columns of entirely supposititious "we are informed."

One small rag even went so far as to guess at the words in which the King had given his consent to the marriage!

The reliable papers maintained a judicious silence. They knew nothing, they were too wise to assume anything. Once the wedding had taken place, they would, one knew, gravely announce the bare facts, with no reference to Royalty.

At the clubs there was, of course, a certain amount of gossip and conjecture.

One of the few advantages of being connected with Royalty may be assumed to be the fact that no one can ask questions of those so connected.

Most young men must have met with a certain amount of interrogation from their friends, but naturally Prince Fritz was spared all this.

As a matter of fact, the marriage, which was not to be a morganatic one, was presumably consented to by the King, as it otherwise could not take place, but more

than that no one knew excepting Maria, whom the young man may have told, and she never said a word.

Prince Fritz was much amused by the assumption of the wildcat press. One article in particular delighted him!

Maria shook her head gravely over it. "It is horrid," she said, adding, after a moment of hesitation, "doesn't—*he* hate these things?"

He kissed her hands. "My beloved, he is a very busy man—too busy to worry over trifles!"

"Of course, but—how dare they pretend to know what he said?"

"They dare because they are too small to be taken any notice of!"

After a moment she said: "Someone ought to prevent such—vulgarity. Isn't it—horrid about *her?*"

He laughed. "My love—do you know that the King has a superior in the Law that made him King?"

"How do you mean?"

He explained, but she barely understood, and he kissed her, laughing. "Darling, kiss me, and let's forget these dull things."

When she had kissed him, she looked at him gravely. "Whenever," she said, the words coming with deliberation, "I hear 'God save the King,' *I* shall stand up and say to myself 'God *bless* the King.'"

They were loitering on the banks of Virginia Water.

In the hotel, drowsing over a cup of tea, sat a certain Mrs. Covington, a kind of official chaperon insisted on by Princess Anne.

The young people would go about together, and old

Drello declared himself too old to go with them, and at Maria's innocent, "Why need we have anybody with us?" even Fritz smiled.

"They all know me, you see," he explained, "owing to those villainous illustrated papers. And—well, we'll take old Violet Covington. She's deaf, and that's something!"

They were to be married in a month's time, and Prince Fritz wished to enjoy his engagement like a wise man. It held certain charms that could never return, he knew.

So nearly every day the three made little pilgrimages together—Prince Fritz, Maria, and the deaf and long-suffering Mrs. Covington.

What did this middle-aged woman think about, one wonders, as she sat waiting for the lovers while they wandered about at Hampton Court, at Kew, even in the City, where Maria loved the old empty churches?

She had been young, and, though she had never been beautiful, she thought she had, which amounts, retrospectively, to precisely the same thing.

She had loved, and she had been loved. And her faded cheeks once showed a faint glow as she watched the young couple hand in hand, praying lovers' egotistical, beautiful prayers, and tears came to her paled eyes. She, too, had once knelt in a church with a man who had loved her and prayed.

Her prayers had been in vain, for she had not tried to make them come true, but for the moment she had been sincere, and, as she watched Maria's dark head bent in reverence close to Fritz's fair one, in the faint

winter sunshine, the feeling of that long-dead day came back to her, and quietly in her dark corner she wept.

She was faded, and kind, and unobtrusive; Fritz and Maria did not exactly like her, for her very value lay in the fact that many disappointments had made her impersonal; but they liked her presence better than they would have liked anyone else's.

They were very happy. It was so like a fairy tale!

He was only a good-looking, well set up young man, but to her he was an Antinous; added to which the romance of his great birth and his delightful renunciation, for her sake, of its privileges of course meant much to her.

To him, she was as beautiful as the sunrise, and her romantic quality lay in the fact that she was only a commoner. He did not precisely think of Cophetua, but possibly there lay at the back of his mind some such comparison.

These little things undoubtedly counted to them both, but they were buttressed, bulwarked by the fact that they loved each other really, not only with their imaginations and ideals, but with the thicker, more vital element of sane, clean passion.

The days flew past. Maria was busy with her modest trousseau, which, she felt, must strike just the right note between humility and pretentiousness.

Lurty's wedding had taken place—ages ago, it seemed—and he and his bride were back from their wedding journey.

They were, of course, thrilled to the marrow by Maria's romance. Lurty had begun to think that he had

arranged it all, whereas there were no bounds to Doris's daydreams in connection with her "brother-in-law."

She amused Fritz, for he had never seen anyone at all like her, but Maria grew less and less able to endure her second-rate airs and graces.

"I can't take you to court, Doris," she broke out once, "because I am not going myself. I couldn't if I wanted to, I believe. Fritz hasn't said so, but Mrs. Crossfield thinks I couldn't—and I'm sure I don't want to!"

"But you know the Duchess of Zeeland——"

"I do. And she is a disagreeable, unkind old woman. If she wasn't a princess, she'd be called vulgar."

"And—the Princess Adalbert?"

Maria, who was embroidering her initials on a delicate white garment of some kind, looked up.

"Doris—please don't harp on these things! I am not going to become a Royalty. I—I am dragging Fritz down, as a matter of fact, and that's what I try not to remember. Please don't remind me, dear."

Doris shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, very well. *I* don't care about it," she declared with magnificent untruthfulness. "I may be *most* things, but I certainly never was a snob!"

After a pause she went on: "Well—you're in luck that the Balkan War is over. What would you have done if he'd had to go with his regiment?"

"Nonsense, Doris! English regiments don't have to fight in the Balkans."

"They might! How about the Crimea! Lurty says

that it was only a bit of luck that Russia didn't interfere, and if she *had*——!"

Maria listened with the thorny patience known to sisters of not brilliant brothers when harangued with many quotations from him, by the brother's new wife.

"Well—the war is over, so that's all right," she declared, peacefully threading her needle under the lamp, "we saw some of the delegates to-day. Such wild, funny-looking men."

Doris was pleased with her new pose as the wide awake wife of a brilliant newspaper man.

"I wonder," she said, "what they are going to do with Sarmania?"

"My dear, you are very learned! What is—or *where* is—Sarmania?"

"Lurty says," Doris began, full of importance, when the door opened, and old Drello put his head in.

"Maria," he said, "Mr. Partlett is here—about the settlements; could you come?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE wedding was, of course, to be very quiet; Fritz had a friend who was a parson, and in his church, somewhere in a very unfashionable neighborhood, it was to take place.

Even Princess Anne was not to come, although it was whispered that she had made a special personal appeal for permission.

She had been to see Maria, and given her a beautiful old lace flounce as delicate as frost in moonlight, to wear on her wedding gown.

"It belonged to my great-grandmother," the kind lady explained, "and she was a very happy woman, so I hope——" her eyes filled.

Maria was very happy. As happy as if she had been marrying a simple gentleman, and her friends, on the whole, accepted the situation as simply as she did.

There was in her some quality that seemed to allay the snob in others.

None of her friends, after their first surprise, dared allow her to see that they regarded her marriage as anything but a quite ordinary one, exceptional only in the perfect accord and sympathy of its principals.

Even Doris tried to conceal her elation in her future brother-in-law; "The Earl of Thanet, *you* know, Prince

Fritz of Zeeland," she heard herself explaining him in the future.

Lurty, up to his eyes in his first novel, was for the first time in his life really busy, and, therefore, at his very best. He liked Fritz, and Fritz liked him in a way, but Lurty was conscious of a certain shyness in his future brother-in-law's presence, and perhaps Fritz was not altogether unconscious of this. One shyness often breeds another.

Lord and Lady Thanet, it was understood by their friends, would immediately after their marriage go to Greece in the Marquis of Penborough's yacht, lent them by that nobleman.

Many friends of Fritz's had called on Maria; some out of policy, some out of kindness, perhaps the greatest number of all out of sheer curiosity.

Apparently she was to have a better time than Princess Anne had predicted. After all, Princess Anne was judging by the past.

In these days of capitalists and Jews the old standards had perhaps shifted a little.

The Countess of Thanet would, it was certain, be a figure of romance to many; and, after all, the King must, however quietly, have given his permission!

All this was Maria's wisdom, it was the wisdom that, emanating a scrap from one person, a scrap from another, was forming a more or less solid opinion among her friends.

"You won't know us when you see us, Maria, in a year's time," Mrs. Crossfield declared merrily.

Maria only smiled. "Shan't I?" She had only a

very vague idea about her future social life, but unconsciously she assumed that her old friends would keep their usual places. She did not care for any of them, excepting, perhaps, old Mrs. Crossfield and Fazzy, but she took for granted that she would go on seeing them all.

And Fritz, seeing this innocent assumption, took great pains not to contradict it.

He was more delighted than he would have cared to say by the way in which his news had been accepted by his world, outside of the extreme inner circle.

He and his wife, he thought, would be poor; but they would be very happy, and have a very jolly time!

Old Drello, according to his wont, was wonderful. All his life he had been wonderful under unusual circumstances, for the reason that he had never tried to be anything at all.

It was very pleasant that his girl was marrying so well, but, after all, he thought, Fritz was the lucky one!

He and Fritz were great friends, the old man accepting the young one as simply as he would have accepted any son-in-law; they talked together very happily, Fritz learning many entrancing details about Maria's babyhood and childhood. He was even given a miniature of his love, at the age of two, sitting on a crimson velvet cushion in a single garment, so scant in its proportions, and so nearly sliding altogether off, that she blushed her deepest when she was shown it.

In his watch, too—the thin platinum masterpiece so admired that day in the bus by Lurty—there now dwelt

a bright yellow curl that only old W. D.'s word could have convinced him had ever grown on the dark head he so loved.

The days skipped by very happily; Christmas was a thing of the past and the New Year had begun.

Then one day, when Maria had been to her singing lesson and was coming home, Tomsk came hurrying after her.

She had hardly ever noticed the dwarf, but quite recently she had seen, as he emerged from his corner to climb up to the piano stool, something in his face that seemed to indicate a wish to speak to her.

"Miss Drello——"

"Yes, Mr. Tomsk?"

They stood facing each other under an electric light. It was beginning to rain and she opened her umbrella while she waited for him to speak.

"I have a cousin," he began abruptly—"a Russian, of course, who is on the Peace Committee——"

"Yes?"

"And he says that Sarmania is to be offered to an English prince."

Tomsk's white face turned up to hers against the background of the wet bricks looked strange, almost wild.

His latest trick was to cultivate a beard, and that beard was of the unlovely type that looks as if moths had got into it.

The poor little man's sunken eyes burned like coals under his correct bowler.

"An English prince?" she asked, gentle in her enfolding happiness.

"Yes. To be King. Perhaps they will send *your* one!"

He laughed, showing, above his little white teeth, over-red gums.

"Yes. Oh, I know. I take in two papers. And—if they should send His Highness Prince Augustus Frederick to be King of Sarmania—well—I only wanted to tell you, Miss Drello——" he broke into a kind of incoherent mumble.

"I—I'm afraid I can't quite hear you," she said, hurriedly; "and I must go—I am in a hurry——"

"Yes, yes," he frowned. "But if they do—why then, you must always remember, there still remains to you—*Tomsk.*"

He made a low bow to the astonished girl, and, unfurling a particularly large umbrella, under which he entirely disappeared, he sped away down the wet street.

Maria hailed a taxi and went home, half angry, half amused, wholly sorry.

So that was what he had been wishing to say?

When she told Fritz, he laughed with the imperviousness to that kind of pathos common to men when the women they honor with their own love are concerned.

"But, Fritz, dear—it is very sad. He is only—I should think—four feet high, and *so* ugly!"

"Evidently he doesn't think so, and that's one good thing, poor little brute."

They were alone in the drawing-room after dinner.

"Fritz, is it true about the English prince?" she asked.

"I believe so. The people out there want one—queer your little friend should have heard about it so soon—supposed to be a secret as yet."

She drew closer to him with a little shiver.

"Fritz—they won't send *you?*"

"No, dear," he returned, taking her into his arms. "It'll be poor Ted—or possibly Bill. I hope," he added absently, "it won't be Bill, because of his wife. She'd hate it. Now, Beautiful, sing to me."

He rose, drawing her to her feet, and half led, half carried her to the piano.

"Just think of it," he said huskily; "only six days more and—you'll be my wife! Oh, Maria, kiss me, and say you're glad——"

CHAPTER XXIV

THEY were to be married on a Tuesday in February, and, on the Saturday before it, Maria lunched with Barbara Gryce in Glanvil Mansions.

Maria had at once, as soon as it was an accomplished fact, told the little secretary of her engagement, and she had, somewhat to her surprise, met with a full forgiveness, or, what was still better, a complete ignoring of her withdrawal from her friend during the last few months.

Barbara had been hurt, but hers was one of those unusual natures that have no room for resentment. Things that were past were for her as if they had never existed.

She gave Maria her deepest attention, and then her fullest sympathy, and Maria was touched by her sweetness.

And now because, had Prince Fritz been just an ordinary gentleman, Barbara would assuredly have been his bride's maid of honor, Maria was spending her last maiden Saturday afternoon with her friend.

They had had lunch, and were sitting close to the little fire, for it was bitterly cold.

Maria lay back in the one easy chair, her left hand

hanging in the firelight, which brought from the large ruby on her fourth finger a glow like that of an eye.

Barba was huddled on the rug, poker in hand.

They had been silent for some time, when Barbara suddenly said, "Oh, Maria, does poor little Tomsk know?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell him?"

"No. I suppose," Maria explained gravely, "that he saw it in the papers—he mentioned it to me—one evening——"

Barbara looked up. "Have you noticed anything queer about him lately?"

"About Tomsk? He is always queer, isn't he?"

Barbara nodded and gave the fire a little poke that sent a series of flame waves over her face, which was troubled.

"Queer—yes. But—I told you about what he did to Miss Pendleton. Well—it wasn't—I am *sure* it wasn't —quite sane."

"Nonsense, Barba. He's sane enough—for a dwarf, I mean."

"No. And he said such odd things, Maria. And always about—*you!*"

Maria raised her heavy, white eyelids indolently. "Does he?"

Tomsk did not greatly interest her.

"Yes. Yesterday morning, when he came to Uncle Wilhelm's he said to me——"

She broke off. "It seems too silly to tell you, but—it rather impressed me——"

"Well, what was it?" Maria's mind was with Fritz, who, she knew, was at that moment lunching with his mother.

Barbara scrambled suddenly to her feet.

"Maria," she declared, brandishing the poker, "the poor little creature is—in love with you!"

Maria stirred uneasily in her chair, and folded her hands so that the ruby lay against the palm of her right hand. She was in the state of deep love when it seems to a woman that no man on earth but the beloved has the right even to know that she exists.

The idea of any man's loving her would have offended her. Tomsk's love seemed almost defilement.

"Don't, Barbara," she said sharply.

Barbara nodded. "I know; it's—horrid. But it's true, dear. He told me he had proposed to you, and that—well—that you did not exactly refuse him!"

"*Barbara!*"

"That's what he said. Of course he is mad, but I thought you ought to know it."

Maria told her what had occurred that rainy evening. "And then he waddled off under his umbrella, looking like a mushroom, or—a tortoise! Barba, I think you ought to tell Herr Sulzer to get rid of him. He is a dreadful little thing."

"Poor little Tomsk! I suppose he forgets that he's a dwarf, and so hideous. Oh, no, I shan't tell Uncle Wilhelm," she resumed, "it will be all right now you are going away——"

After a pause she went on suddenly: "Did you see in the papers that the Sarmanians refused to have

Prince William? Did Prince Fritz tell you about it?"

"Yes. He's glad, because of Prince William's wife, who is very delicate."

"Then whom will they send?"

Maria shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know—except that it won't be Fritz."

She did not know, and she did not care.

The only thing that mattered to her was that her world should remain undisturbed, and her world lay within the circumference of Prince Fritz's arms. She was selfish with the unconscious, innocent selfishness of her perfect happiness.

Barbara watched her wistfully. She herself was so shy; so devoid of the gift of friend-making, that she valued Maria's affections far more than that sentiment deserved.

Maria, moreover, was not only her friend, she was her romance, her poetry.

"It must be wonderful," she said thoughtfully, drawing a chair close to Maria's and sitting down in it.

"It is, dear."

"Maria—what would you do if—if anything happened to—break off your marriage—as it does in books?"

The color and beauty of Maria's face seemed to drain slowly away as she absorbed the meaning of the question. She was positively plain when she answered it. "DO? I'd do—nothing. I'd simply die."

"Dying is rather—active, isn't it? I mean—could you bear it?"

Maria's dark, sulky face bent closer to the fire. "No," she said, harshly, "I couldn't. I wouldn't try to bear it. Why do you say such horrible things, Barbara?"

The other girl watched her with curiosity.

"It *must* be wonderful," she repeated, "to care like that!"

The clock struck four as she spoke, and Maria stirred in her chair as women stir preparatory to rising.

"I must go, dear," she said, "Madame Xenia is to be there at five——" Her beautiful blush arrested Barbara's attention as they both rose.

"Your wedding dress?"

"Yes."

Gravely they faced each other for a moment, while Maria's rush of color ebbed away, leaving her pale. "Oh, Barba," she said softly. "Oh, Barba."

She felt a little faint all the way home as the taxi, very badly driven by a man who looked like a tramp, zigzagged along the crowded streets.

Only two more days! She lay back in the uncomfortable vehicle and closed her eyes. She would not see Fritz until the next afternoon; he was dining with Royalty that night; but on Sunday afternoon he would come.

The dressmaker had arrived and was waiting for her in her room when she reached home.

Madame Xenia was an Englishwoman, but in the interests of trade she spoke broken English. She was small, and dark, and her nose was blotched and mottled

for some obscure cutaneous reason quite unconnected with alcohol. Also, she was in her way an artist.

When Maria had taken off her coat and skirt and blouse, and the delicate white gown was slipped over her head, it fell into place as if by magic, dropping into lovely folds, and long sweeps of lace that swathed the girl's slim, vigorous body and idealized it as a painter would have made his paint idealize her.

Maria gazed at herself in the glass.

"Thank you, Madame Xenia," she said, "I like it very much."

"Thank you, Miss Drello. Yes, it is right. It is beautiful. And now," the dressmaker added, "the veil."

She opened a long cardboard box that lay on the bed, and took from it a cascade of the finest tulle.

"It goes so—chust over the 'air," she explained, "and the wreath——" But Maria held up her hand.

"Look out of the window," she said, hurriedly, "and see that no one's coming up the path——"

Madame Xenia drew back the faded chintz curtains and peered down through the dusk in which the flagged path was a pale streak.

"No, Miss Drello—nobody comes——"

Maria bent her stately head, and the little woman worked busily for five minutes, adjusting the veil. Then she laid the delicate wreath of orange and myrtle blossoms in its place and pinned it carefully.

"There."

She drew back, and Maria stepped nearer to the glass.

To her dying day she remembered her own face as

the doorbell pealed through the house; she never forgot the slow blanching of her face, the way it seemed to shrink.

"Good gracious, Miss Drello," the dressmaker broke out, forgetting her accent, "are you ill? Whatever——"

Maria silenced her with a gesture.

"Go and tell Thimblebee," she said hoarsely, "that if that is anyone to see me—I will see him—or her —*whoever it may be!*"

Madame Xenia left the room without a word, and the girl, clutching at a chair, her eyes fixed on her face in the glass, stood and waited.

"Whoever it might be that came while she had her wedding veil on," Fritz had told her, "she must see." It was an old superstition in his family, and she could not disregard it.

And some one had rung at the door.

Of course—it might be Lurty, who had forgotten his key; or a belated wedding gift; or old Fazzy; or half a hundred other things.

But she knew it was not.

When Madame Xenia came back, grinning broadly, Maria was at the door, her long train gathered up over her arms.

"Surely, miss, you aren't going to see *that* little figure of fun," the dressmaker exclaimed, "*such* a little 'orror?"

So it was Tomsk. Tomsk could have no possible connection with Fritz, the girl told herself desperately, trying to laugh, and yet——

"Yes, I must see him, Madame Xenia," she ans quietly. "Not because it is he, but because he person who asked for me while my wedding wreat on my head."

She went downstairs slowly, looking in the half ness like a beautiful white ghost.

Tomsk stood at the stair foot, his silk hat cl to his breast.

"Miss Drello," he cried, waving a damp-looking green newspaper at her, "it is as I said!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Tomsk?"

The dwarf drew nearer. "It is as I said. are sending *your one* to be king!"

CHAPTER XXV

OLD Drello, who had been to a matinée, came in at six. He looked very grave, and a folded newspaper was in his hand.

Thimblebee looked at him in some alarm as she helped him take off his coat.

"Where's Maria?" he asked.

"She's—in her room. Oh, sir, is h'anything wrong?"

Her poor maimed eyelid trembled, as it always did when she was deeply moved, and Drello looked away from it; it was an unpleasant sight. "Yes," he said, "there is trouble, great trouble. You'll know later. Ask her to come to my study, will you?"

The newspaper in his hand, he went to his study and drew his shabby armchair close to the fire, which had been forgotten and was nearly out.

He waited there rubbing his thin, handsome old hands together. He had no idea what he should say to her, the chances were that she did not know, and that he would have to tell her.

He looked at the picture of his wife that hung over the chimneypiece. She should have been there to help him, he thought with something distantly like resentment, as if she had deserted him in his trial.

Maria did not come, and he did not move, but sat

there in the room that was the very core of his home to him, surrounded by things he had known, some from his childhood, nearly all from his early manhood.

The big mahogany table had been his father's, the lyre-backed horsehair chairs he had bought for his bride; two tall blue vases on the chimneypiece were the first wedding anniversary presents he and his wife had bought, they were very expensive, so she gave him one, and he gave her the other.

He remembered so well how they had laughed as they drove home in a four-wheeler, each one carrying a vase.

And there was her little chippendale work-table, its deep green baize drawer, like a box, visible underneath. In it was her last bit of crochet, the fine steel hook just as she had left it.

She had been ill only a few hours—at least, that is what she had allowed him to believe—and before she died she had told him that he must take great care of Maria. And he had tried to, so far as lay in his power; he had done his best, yet now he must tell his daughter, *Rosamund's* daughter, this awful thing! The poor old man, vaguely feeling his inadequacy to the situation, leant his head on his hand and groaned. In a moment he must fetch her—if she did not come——

And there she was beside him.

He looked up with a start. "You want me, father?"

"You—you know, my dear?"

She nodded. "I know that—they want him—to go to Sarmania."

"Who told you?"

"Herr Sulzer's accompanist, a Russian dwarf, named Tomsk."

"Have you heard from—Prince Fritz?"

Drello had been calling his future son-in-law Fritz of late, quite simply, but now, in view of the young man's potential kingship, his title came back to the old man's tongue as simply.

"No."

"Nor heard from him?"

"No, father."

"It's—in the evening papers, my dear. I fear it must be true."

She bowed her head. "It is true," she said.

Then she knelt down, and, poking the ashy fire, replenished it, taking the lumps of coal out of the scuttle with her fingers and laying them noiselessly on the fire, as if it were imperative that no noise should be made in the silent room.

"He will go?" Drello asked perfunctorily.

"Oh, yes, he will go."

She wiped the coal dust from her hand on the run, and rose.

"Shall I stay with you, father?"

"No, no, my dear—I—I am glad you take it so quietly," he answered, looking up at her, his hooded eyes dark with trouble.

She nodded, and left him alone.

He sat there by the fire until dinner was announced, and then, when Maria did not come down, he went into the dining-room alone and sat through a meal that

reminded him of the first dinner he had tried to eat after his wife's death.

Thimblebee watched him, her eyelid fluttering.

It was hard that she, who had been in the room when his wife died, who had brought Maria up since that day, should now be told nothing. But that is the fate of even the most faithful, the most valued, servants; just at first they are not told; they must wait until the absolute newness of the shock is over and then someone tells them.

Who knows, meantime, what agonies of blind conjecture they sometimes go through?

"Says she won't have any dinner," the good old woman blurted out at last, twisting her gouty fingers together.

"Don't bother her, Thimblebee," was his answer, "just let her alone."

There was no sleep for Thimblebee that night. She and Jessie sat up very late in the kitchen, half fearing, half hoping for a summons to the library or to Maria's room, but the bells were quiet. Even the door bell did not ring all the endless evening.

"Funny thing, Mr. Lurty not coming to inquire," Jessie remarked once, looking up from the velvet blouse she was making for herself.

"'To inquire?'—don't talk like that," snapped Thimblebee, "a body'd think there was illness—or—death—in the house——"

"Well, whatever it is, it must be pretty bad," cook answered. "'E never ate a thing, and, as to her—I told you 'ow she looked when I met her upstairs!"

There was a pause. The two faithful women were sleepy and tired, but they sat on for a long time, waiting to be sent for; waiting to be told to do some humble office to ease the suffering that was in the house that was their home.

At midnight they heard Mr. Drello go to bed.

As was his way he first opened the house door, and stood for a moment looking up at the sky, breathing a little fresh air, and then, closing the door, he bolted and locked it, turned off the gas, and went slowly upstairs.

At one, Thimblebee laid aside her knitting, and, creeping up to Maria's door, stood and listened. All was perfectly still, and the room was dark. Then the servants gave up their watch and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE horror of any great trouble lies not in the first shock of it, but in what seems its hourly, daily repetition. Every hour contains, in little, the whole sorrow, as a drop of sea water contains microscopically the whole of the sea, and every sunrise brings, like something new, the misery forgotten awhile overnight.

It would, therefore, be a bootless task to try to describe the effect on Maria Drello of the decision of the British Government to send Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland to fill the empty throne of Sarmania.

The hours passed somehow, and the girl's only comfort was that from the moment when, at the foot of the stairs, Tomsk had told her the news, she had never doubted its truth.

She was at least spared the hideous alternations of doubt and hope that rise and fall like the temperature of a fever patient, and, like that fever, destroy the sufferer's very fiber.

All day Sunday old Drello sat in his study waiting for news, but none came, other than the elaborate confirmation in the Sunday papers of the truth.

Lurty and his wife came in during the afternoon, full of excitement.

"But, of course she'll go with him?" Mrs. Lurty asked. She herself, she felt, would, in all but mere looks, make a better queen than her sister-in-law.

"Nonsense, Doris—I have told you a hundred times that they can't be married now," her husband interrupted. "Where *is* she, father?" he added.

Old W. D., whose face had taken on during the night a yellowish tint like that of old ivory, glanced toward the ceiling. "Upstairs."

"Have you seen her?"

"No."

"But—*why*, father?"

"One reason is that I haven't tried to."

Doris rose. "I'll just go and see how she is," she began, but old Drello stopped her. "You'll do nothing of the kind," he declared. "Sit down and drink your tea, my dear, and let Maria alone. When she wants to see—us—she'll know where to find us."

It was a mild day, full of the promise of spring.

Church bells were ringing, and laughter was heard from the next garden, where some children were playing.

Doris set down her cup impatiently. She was not unkind, but hers was one of the frequently met natures that imbibe a curious kind of mental nourishment from the excitement caused by the trouble of others.

She was sincerely sorry for Maria, but, as Maria *must* suffer, she wanted to look on at the suffering.

But she dared say no more, for she was a coward, and old Drello for the first time impressed her with a feeling of awe.

Lurty sat in silence, his brows knitted, his arms folded. There was in him a certain grotesque resemblance to his father, and it appeared strongly now.

"I say, father," he burst out finally, as the clock struck five, "hasn't—*he*—written or anything?"

"No."

"Well—but—what are you going to do?"

Doris watched them eagerly as she puffed at her cigarette.

"I am going to do—nothing," his father returned. briefly and with a tone of finality.

"But he *can't* just—do nothing——"

Old W. D. rose, towering over his seated son.

"I don't know what he can do, Lurty," he said. "But you and I can and are going to do nothing. Do you understand me?"

Lurty flushed. "Of course—sir."

"Very good. I'll have no interference from you, my son. Maria must do the best she can; we can help her only by holding our tongues. As to—Prince Fritz—whatever he chooses to do, we must abide by. That," he added, opening the door into the hall, "is all I have to say."

He went out, closing the door behind him, and presently Lurty and his bride saw him going down the moist flags and out into the street.

"My word, Lurty, the old boy is very—magnificent, isn't he? I didn't think he could be so—so stern!" Doris laughed a little shrilly. "After all, king or no king, it seems to me that poor Maria is just simply being—jilted!"

Lurty nodded. "Poor old Maria! I can't think why he doesn't write, though; it does seem queer, doesn't it?"

"Very," agreed Doris with emphasis. "I say, Lurty, your father is very *Spartanic*—nice word, that!—and very grand, but—it seems to me that you ought to find out from—Prince Fritz, what he's going to do."

"I ought to? Nonsense, Doris——"

"Well—your father isn't going to, and someone must. It's too *dreadful* for poor Maria."

"Of course it's dreadful, darling, but—you heard what he said——"

"Bosh!" She rose and, coming to his chair, sat down on his knees and put her arms round his neck. "Lurty—after all, your dear old dad doesn't know so *very* much about Society, does he?"

Lurty grunted, and kissed her arms. He was very much in love with his wife, and had not yet gone through the shattering experience of finding that she managed him.

"Now I," went on Doris, "am *sure* that you ought to see the Prince. Poor fellow, he would be only too glad to have some one to talk to," she added craftily.

"I can't go and ask the fellow if he's going to make my sister a queen."

"*Sweetheart!* Of course you can't. But you could make it all so much simpler and easier for them both."

"But what should I say?"

With many kisses she talked to him, coaxing, explaining, persuading, her hands smoothing his hair as she talked. At last he agreed to go, and was rewarded

with a final kiss. "Poor Fritz," she concluded, "he'll jump at the chance of a talk with you."

But Prince Augustus Frederick did not jump at the chance when finally, the next day, Lurty screwed up his courage and asked for admittance to His Highness's rooms.

Lurty had come to see a young man who had been on the point of becoming his brother-in-law; he found an English prince who was on the point of becoming a king.

Prince Fritz sat at a writing-table that was covered with papers; he was in uniform, and looked very tired.

He looked up as Lurty entered, but did not rise.

"How do you do, Drello?" he said, between absent-mindedness and annoyance.

And poor Lurty felt suddenly that he himself was a very inferior young man come hither on a very ridiculous errand.

"I—I hope," he stammered, "that you don't mind my coming."

But he saw that the future king of Sarmania did mind.

His Highness looked at a clock that stood on the table. "I am extremely busy," he answered coldly; "and I can give you only a few moments——"

There was a pause.

"May I ask," Prince Fritz asked presently, "whether Miss Drello asked you to come to see me?"

Then the very best possible thing happened.

Lurty Drello lost his temper.

He suddenly forgot that the man before him was a blood relation to his king, and going to be a king himself. He remembered only that he was a young man who had been going to marry his sister, and who was making his sister suffer.

He rose, his plain face not without a certain rigidity, and advanced a step or two.

"Look here," he said roughly, "we didn't ask you to propose to my sister. We asked nothing of you. You came to us. And—you were to have married her to-morrow. And you can't. Oh, I know that you can't—so does she—so must everyone with a grain of common sense; but prince or no prince, by God, you owe her an explanation!"

The veins in his badly modeled brow stood out dark and thick, he was breathing hard.

After a short pause Prince Fritz rose and held out his hand.

"You are right, Lurty," he said slowly. "I have been a brute. But—it wasn't because I didn't care, it was because I have been extremely busy. Also—I—well, funked it."

Lurty drew a deep breath.

"That's all right," he said awkwardly. "I'll—I'll tell her——"

But Fritz stayed him with a gesture. "No, Lurty, no. You must never tell her you came here. Promise me—I will write to her to-night—I can't make you understand, but—I have literally been too busy to think even of her—except at night—now—will you promise?"

Lurty hesitated. "All right. I promise. I—I say, I'm afraid she's awfully cut up——"

Fritz did not answer; but his eyes softened.

"Look here, Drello, you and I shall probably never meet again, but—I want you to remember this: I have to leave her, but—I love your sister."

"I—I know, Fritz"—the name slipped out and neither of them noticed it; "but—as you do, why didn't you say no to this Balkan business?"

A strange little smile quivered on the elder young man's lips, and then died away, leaving him less of the friend, more of the prince.

"I must say good-bye now," he answered, disregarding the question. "Remember your promise, and —I will write to-night."

They shook hands and Lurty turned away. At the door he looked back.

Prince Augustus Frederick of Zeeland had forgotten him, and was again immersed in his papers.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT snowed that night, and the next morning, at about eleven, old Drello was sweeping the garden path. He loved doing this, just as he loved digging and planting flowers.

The morning was fine, still, very cold, and bounded by a blue sky. The cedar, with its layers white and glittering, cast a blue shadow, and the dry creepers looked, the old man decided, as if they were done on dark paper in Chinese white.

He was, if not happier that morning, at least less acutely miserable; Maria had come down to breakfast, resuming her duties without apology or explanation.

She had not mentioned Prince Fritz, nor the fact that the day was to have been her wedding day.

She did not, her father decided, even look very ill. She looked like some one else, but not ill.

As he brushed the soft, dry snow aside with his broom he reflected. Yes, that was it, she looked like some one else. And—she was not beautiful. Her beauty would, no doubt, come back, but for the time being it was gone. The bones in her face were a little too heavy, and now this showed, the flesh seeming to have shrunk in some way.

The thought of her youth comforted her father.

She was so young—in a year's time she will be quite happy; and, after all, he smiled, in his old age, what is a year?

As old people do, he forgot that the year that to him seemed an hour would to her in her hurt youth drag like a century.

He was half-way down the path, having done his work with little right-and-left sweeps of his broom, when the garden door, which was ajar, opened, and a young man came in; a soldierly looking boy with a glass screwed in one eye.

"—er—Mr. Drello?" he asked.

"Yes."

"H'm! My name is Gunning. I have brought you a note from Prince Augustus Frederick."

From an inside pocket of an enormous overcoat that looked in its unwieldiness as if it could stand alone, he produced the letter and stood waiting while Drello drew off his snowy gloves.

"Fine weather, sir, isn't it?" he asked cheerily. He had rosy cheeks and looked very young indeed.

"Yes, it's a grand morning—Oh, thank you!"

The young fellow hesitated. "I believe there's an answer, Mr. Drello——"

"Ah! then we must go in."

Young Gunning was delighted. He had heard tales of the beauteous Maria and was not above cherishing a secret hope of a glimpse of her.

He followed her father into the house, but was taken to the library and the door was shut.

Old Drello read the letter, which was very short.

"I'll not be long," he said, as he sat down at the old-fashioned writing-desk and chose a pen. He wrote slowly, for his hand was cold, but he did not hesitate.

Gunning wished he knew the contents of Fritz's letter, and what the answer was to it. He was a nice youth, and not more curious than other young creatures, but a love story is always interesting, and this one was so romantic.

His own love, for the moment, was centered in a lady of forty, and he believed himself to be somewhat blighted by her unresponsiveness, but at the same time he did wish that beastly door would open and the nearly-to-have-been Princess Fritz come in.

And it did open, and she did come in.

She wore a dark coat and skirt and a plain white silk shirt.

"Beautiful?" he used to say afterward, "my hat! Plain a girl as I ever saw in my life. Dark, lots of hair, and big eyes, but—dash it all, I can't see why he ever fell in love with her."

Maria glanced at him, put a vase of flowers she had brought on a table, and left the room without speaking.

Then Drello turned, his letter in his hand.

"I am," he said, "obliged to you for bringing me His Highness's note, Mr.—ah——"

"Gunning."

"Mr. Gunning."

"Oh, that's quite all right, sir. He and I are great friends—or have been. I suppose when he's King

he'll have to be pally with the Kaiser and little what's his name of Italy."

"It is a wonderful experience for a young man."

"Isn't it? Of course," the boy's face glowed with sympathy, "we are all awfully sorry about—about—his marriage—poor chap. But at the same time—to be King!"

His utter lack of tact was rather refreshing in these days of overdiplomatic young men, and his honesty amused Drello.

"Yes. You mean to say that any young man can be married, while few achieve a throne."

"Exactly, sir. Poor old Fritz doesn't look very cheerful, but of course he's as pleased as Punch, really. It seems," he went on, delighted at being allowed to express his opinion to this picturesque old thing in the new goloshes, "like one of what's his name's books, doesn't it?" William Drello sat down.

"One of *whose* books?"

"'The Prisoner of Zenda' man. Now there *is* a book," he concluded, with some rapture. "I've read it twice!"

"Mr. Anthony Hope would be much gratified to know that——"

Gunning blushed scarlet. "Ah, now you're chaffing me! But isn't it like a novel, this Samaria business?"

"Very."

"Only—I said that to him—to Fritz—yesterday, and—guess what *he* said?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Well, it seems that Ipniz—the capital, you know,

is famous only for its—cheeses! Sarmania is a grazing country, and they are a most stodgy lot of people —they make cheeses and—blankets!"

Drello laughed. "Dear me, that sounds very unromantic."

"Yes, doesn't it! Funny thing, though, their little old Royal Family utterly dying out like that. It seemed they were scared blue lest one of the other countries should what'd you call—annex—them. They love being a kingdom; no socialists—nothing of that kind."

He rose, and Drello shook hands with him.

"Good-bye, Mr. Gunning, and once more, my thanks for bringing the note."

When the young man had gone the old room seemed to miss his pleasant face, and to look a little older, a little duller for its loss. Some young people are very becoming to a room.

Drello stood for a moment by the fire thinking of a baby son he and his wife had had, and lost a year before Maria was born. His name was Sebastian.

Presently the old man went to the drawing-room.

"My dear," he said to Maria, who was dusting the china in the old cabinet. "I have just had a note from Prince Fritz. He is coming at three o'clock to—to say good-bye to us."

She set down the teapot on the table.

"Thank you, father."

"Will you—will you care to see him, Maria?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I shall see him."

* * * * * * *

Prince Fritz arrived as the clock struck three, and found Maria and her father in the drawing-room.

"I have not come, or written, before," he began abruptly, "because I have been extremely busy. Besides, there is little to be said, and I knew you would understand."

Drello's bow answered him, and he went on.

"I need not, I think, tell you what my feelings are about—our marriage, Maria, you know."

She raised her slow-moving eyes to his for the first time since he began to speak.

"Do I?" she asked.

"*Don't* you?"

"I wonder."

He gave a little quick frown of impatience. "You must. There is no use in saying it, but—you surely don't doubt my love."

Old Drello moved slowly to the door, but Prince Fritz called him back. "Don't go, Mr. Drello."

Then he went on to Maria, "Surely you don't doubt my love."

After a pause she answered, choosing her words with deliberation. "I know that you did love me."

He rose with a quick glance at the clock.

"My dear," he said gently, but perfunctorily, "there is no use in discussing it, or in playing with words. But for circumstances which I am powerless to resist this would have been our wedding day. You know that I love you. Therefore you must know that I am not happy."

"Prince William refused the offer," she returned.

He shrugged his shoulders. "He did. He is a married man."

His face had hardened. What he had said was true, he did love Maria, although at this moment she was irritating him by forcing him to see things he was prepared to ignore.

"Do not let us detain you," she returned haughtily.

He bowed. "No—I must go. My dear—I did not ask for the crown of Sarmania. It was offered to me, and—*it is wished here that I go.* Moreover, I own, as you mentioned my cousin's refusal, that I am—glad in some ways."

She rose. "I understand." Then she held out her hand. "Good-bye, Fritz."

He bent and kissed her fingers, shook hands with Drello, and left the house. When the door had closed she said to her father, "Should you mind if we had tea at once? I am thirsty."

PART II

CHAPTER I

HIGH up in an old house on the left bank of the river, Maria Drello stood on the balcony reading a letter.

The sun was just setting, and over the roofs red glints showed where the river crept through its prison walls to the open country.

The balcony was a narrow one, with an ancient wrought iron railing; inside it one had, in the dusk, a glimpse of a shining bare floor, a gilded table, a piano.

In the air was a faint smell of frying onions, a smell which, if it be not abhorrent to one, is apt to be very delightful, full of homely comfort and intimacy.

The room was quite empty apparently, for no sound came from it to the balcony, and the girl looked as though she knew herself to be alone.

In the clear evening sunlight everything about her showed very distinctly.

She wore a simple pink frock, her beautiful dark hair was packed close to her head in the old way, she wore at her throat as a brooch a little peacock wrought in silver and enamel, that her father had given her years before.

At first sight she looked much as she had looked

the day Prince Fritz had said good-bye to her, but on closer inspection there were changes other than those inevitable ones due to the mere passing of time in her face.

It was more easily expressive now, more mobile; the queer stillness seemed gone out of it, and as she finished her letter and looked down at the street her eyes moved more rapidly than they had done in the old days. She looked rather younger, on the whole, though it was over two years since the day that was to have been her wedding day. She looked younger, was less heavy, and the changes in her face, each of them very slight, were collectively enough to make her decidedly more beautiful.

And now as she leaned over the rusty railing with its delicate tracery of flowers, looking down at the busy life in the shabby street, she made a picture that two youths in a house opposite gazed at in unabashed rapture.

"Ma foi, Jacques—she is of an amazing beauty."

"She is—where's that Kodak?"

Evening brings, in London, a sense of rest; Paris evenings bring an anticipation not of peace, but of amusement.

There was, even in the poor street of the Lyre, a little hurry of excitement, people laughed, and jested, and chatted, in a tone different from that which had been heard all day long.

Maria loved this hour. Her work was over, and she was tired with a good fatigue that could enjoy repose and entertainment.

The dyer in the little passage opposite her window was taking in the pieces of stuff that, freshly dipped, had been drying in the sun all day; he was a pleasant little man with a whistle like a blackbird's; she could hear him even in the evening hubbub piping to himself.

Next door the pretty girl in the dairy was looking out for her young man, and on a balcony farther down the street a pair of lovers leaned, their arms round each other.

Maria loved La Rue dé la Lyre; it lay in the heart of the prosperously poor quarter, and was full of history.

Formerly its tall houses with their flagged courtyards had been the homes of rich people; the stairs were broad and shallow, made easy for the delicate feet of ladies of the old days, and the ceilings were high, the doors carved.

The outer door of Maria's flat was beautiful with garlands of fruit, which her little maid kept bright with oil, and which might have been an ornament to one of those strange piecemeal houses in America, but for the fact that it had never been seen by a reconstructive American eye!

Presently, when the lights below were all lit, and the slamming of shutters declared that night was really come, Maria went in.

Her lamps were lit, her dinner table laid.

The room had a charm of its own, although it had to serve as dining-room as well as drawing-room. The coolness of it was delightful, and with a little sigh

of creature-comfort, she sat down and gave a vigorous pull to the green bell-rope.

The answer came through the closed door, in a high, cheerful voice. "*Bien*, mademoiselle, I am coming at once."

Opening her letter, the girl reread it while waiting for her dinner.

DEAR MARIA:

Thanks for your letter, which was welcome, as we had had no news from you for six weeks. The baby is better, but very delicate. Otherwise, little news. I got seventy-five pounds for a story last month, but it was spent before I got it, so it didn't help much.

Doris is really too bad. She spent five guineas on a hat yesterday!

The governor is not well, and this is what I have been meaning to write to you for some time.

Don't you think you ought to come home and look after him? I don't want to preach, but he is old, and ill, and it isn't right that he should be all alone. I'd have him here, even though we are pretty crowded as it is, but Doris simply won't hear of it. He misses poor old Fazzy more than you'd think, and Barbara Gryce—I met her the other day—says she thinks he is failing.

Fred Crossfield is going to be married. She's got a squint, but some money, so he's satisfied.

Nothing else to say, so I'll stop.

Your affectionate brother,

LURTY.

P. S.—I do honestly think you ought to come home and look after father.

There were for dinner lentil soup—with a slice of lemon in it—a little fried fish of some sort, a bit of veal and a potato, a salad, and a cup of coffee.

An excellent meal, served by a flighty looking little maid in a Breton cap, which she wore, she who was born in Nogent-sur-Seine and had never even seen Brittany, because it was becoming.

Maria had had two servants supposedly of the type dear to novelists—the hard-featured, devoted, middle-aged domestic genius—but the real type is nearly as extinct as that most extinct of all birds, the dodo; and of her two attempts at it one robbed her and the other possessed, in spite of her lack of beauty, a fascination (lavishly responded to) for the other sex, that rendered life a burden to her mistress.

Noëmi (real name something quite different) was a hussy, probably, but she was a cheerful one, a good cook, a girl who appreciated cleanliness as a beauty, both in herself and her surroundings, and her pretty little face was a thing pleasant to see; so, as she had not yet shown signs of anything worse than a very generally applied coquetry, her mistress regarded her as a treasure.

"Is mademoiselle going out this evening?" she asked presently.

"No, Noëmi, why?"

"Because in that case perhaps mademoiselle would allow me to go to the cinema?"

Maria gave her permission, and half an hour later was alone in the flat.

Her brother's letter troubled her. She felt that she

ought to go back to London. Indeed, there was in her mind no doubt whatever on this point.

Yet she intended not to go.

The year that she had gone on living in the old house after Prince Fritz left England had been to her a year of almost unbearable misery.

She had said little, so little that her father and their friends were wont to congratulate each other on her lack of deep feeling.

One day, coming quietly downstairs, she had overheard old Nicholas Fazackerley say to her father, "Well, Bill, thank God she took it so *easy*. It would have killed some women."

She had stood there on the stairs for a few moments, leaning heavily on the handrail, fighting down a fierce impulse to go into the room and tell them that they were fools, that it *had* killed her—the Maria they had known; that this Maria who went gravely about her duties was only a ghost.

She recalled this little episode as she sat by her open window that July night in Paris.

She remembered the interminable days, the sleepless nights, the strange physical illness that crept over her so slowly that no one noticed it until the morning when she fainted while giving the day's orders to Jessie.

And then that August by the sea; her father's kind tormenting; his helpless attempts to cheer her up; Barbara Gryce's little visit. Then the return to town; the horror of going back to the house; and then the awful episode of Tomsk's visit.

Sitting there, she deliberately recalled it all.

The coronation of the King of Sarmania took place on the thirtieth of September.

Maria had not opened a paper since the first fixing of the date.

She had been working very hard at her singing since her return, taking a lesson every day, and practicing at home as well; she had been reading avidly, she had been studying German.

Except for her fainting fit and short subsequent illness, she had not broken down, no one had seen her other than busy; she had given up none of her duties.

It was reserved for Tomsk to ruin what she had been striving to build up.

One day in early October—a rainy, dark day, with a hint of fog in the heavy air, she was practicing in the closed drawing-room.

It was so dark that she had lit the gas near the piano, but the curtains were not yet drawn.

The house—the world—was to her perfectly quiet, but for the sound of her beautiful voice going over and over an exercise of some kind.

At the back of her brain lay an unanalyzed feeling of relief. Prince Fritz had ceased to exist; the King of Sarmania was securely seated on his throne.

It would be hard to explain why this was a relief to her; but it was.

She sang on and on till at the far end of the long drawing-room the windows were mere spots of gray light against the gathering darkness within.

And then suddenly, at one of the windows, she saw a face.

There is, perhaps, no face in the world that would not, pressed against a window, at dusk, look horrible.

And this one, with its expression of alert intentness, was dreadful. It was a face of high lights and deep shadows; a face done crudely in black and white, with no intermediate shades.

Maria started, and rose from the piano; then she stood terrified, her eyes fixed on those shadowy, terrible eyes beyond the glass.

Then, against the glass, there came a short tap; and a louder knock.

As if hypnotized, Maria Drello walked across the room to the window.

She was frightened, but she was not a coward, and she opened the window with deliberation.

"Mr. Tomsk!"

It was indeed the dwarf, his small person alive with excitement and importance.

"Miss Drello."

"Oh, Tomsk," she cried, calling him in her relief by his surname, as she had so often heard Sulzer call him, "you frightened me so!"

He came into the room, set his hat carefully on a chair, shook himself like a dog to free his clothes of the drops of rain that pearled them, and then made her a low and extremely dignified bow. "Miss Drello," he said, "you will have noticed that I have not been at Professor Sulzer's of late."

In her relief she spoke very kindly. "Yes. And

we have missed you, for the other accompanist was very bad!"

Again he bowed; the bow of a public man receiving on a platform, before a crowded house, a well-deserved tribute.

"I was," he resumed, "not well, and my doctor ordered me a rest—and a change of scene."

"I see."

"I thought at first of going to Russia; I was born at Kiev, and christened in the cathedral there—and my mother is buried at—Moscow. And then, Miss Drello—Oh, Miss Drello—I thought—of *you!*"

Maria drew back. "Of *me*, Mr. Tomsk?"

"Yes. I knew how you must long for news—from *there*. So—I went there. I saw the coronation. I saw him. And now," he concluded, with a gesture of much magnificence, "I have come to tell you about it."

That evening in Paris, nearly two years later, Maria could recall, *refeel*, the whole scene. She could see the dwarf, at that moment, in his own eyes so piteously, tall and strong; she could see the dusk creeping like a fog through the old room up to where the one gas jet defied and arrested its advance.

She had wanted to send Tomsk away; to forbid him to interfere with her life; but she could not.

She was constrained, as if by some superior force, to listen while he told his story.

And he told his story well, with a directness, a chariness of adjectives, that had great value.

"It was night," he said, "when I got to Ipniz. I took a cab and drove to the Hotel Crown Prince. The

coronation was to be the next day, and the town was illuminated.

"A hundred years ago the town was burned to the ground, all except the cathedral and the castle, which is on top of a kind of mountain that grows out of the market-place. So the houses are new, and bald, and ugly.

"There is, from the old days, only a fountain in the market-place, and it is splendid! Well—I was tired, and I went to bed. Ipniz is thirteen hours from Vienna, you know."

Maria remembered that she had nodded. All her reluctance to listen to the dwarf's narration was now swamped by a rushing tide of eagerness to know; to know all about the town in which Fritz—her Fritz—lived.

"The next day was," he went on, "the coronation. There was wine running in the old fountain. Red wine. It looked like blood. And the bells—bronze, they are, cast by Nicholas of Weibe in 1590—began ringing at sunrise. It is dark in Ipniz, even in summer, till about six, the mountains lie so close about it. But on one side there was, in 1840, a landslide. And that lets "you ing slice of light. It comes over the houses,

He cam, and (the people think it a miracle, and chair, shook lies across the statue of St. Walgom, in the drops of e cathedral. At six I was up and out. her a low and exs a mass of red and white roses."

he said, "you wilill feel at her heart the pang with Professor Sulzer's rd this, and recalled the white and

In her relief sht to her once in an osier chest.

"There is," Tomsk went on, "a celebrated garden to the south of the town, where these roses grow like weeds. They say the Ipniz attar of roses is better than the Turkish!"

"And then?" she said.

"Then, at ten o'clock, he came. The street up to the palace winds round and round the mountain. It was a fine sight. First a regiment of savage-looking soldiers with jeweled knives in their belts and frowning dark faces. Then two Greek priests. Then," Tomsk spoke reverently, "the Archimandrite, and after him—Prince Augustus Frederick. He was dressed in uniform, but wore a long blue cloak (the Sarmanians wear blue, like the Greeks; they hate red, because of the Turks)—lined with ermine. It is a very little country," he added, "and very unimportant. Perhaps because it is so unimportant no one has troubled it; its old customs have not been changed.

"The Prince followed the priests to the market-place, and there one of the priests, when the troops had formed a hollow square, drew from the fountain —flowing red, remember!—a silver cupful, and handed it to the Prince.

"This he drank. No one cheered; no one spoke, except the Archimandrite, who murmured prayers. And then the procession went into the Cathedral, which," Tomsk added, "was lighted by thousands of candles, and smelt of spices."

Maria had been able to visualize it then; she could visualize it now.

"He was—pale?" she had asked.

"Yes. His face was as white as death, but he looked proud. Every man is glad," the poor dwarf added, "when he is made a king."

Then he had gone on. He had described in his short-syllabled, short-sentenced way the whole of the coronation.

And Maria had seen it.

The sun had burst in through the jeweled windows at the height of the scene as the Prince, kneeling, took the oaths that were necessary to make him King of Sarmania.

"Old Lord Beaminster, the British Minister plenipotentiary," Tomsk explained, "represented your King. And all the ladies had large fans, so that on one side of the cathedral there was a gentle, white blur, as they stirred the hot air."

When he had completed his narrative Tomsk had sat down. Suddenly, "Are you glad I went?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Tomsk. It was kind of you."

Her voice was a half tone lower than usual; she felt ill—almost sick; the feeling for Fritz, whom she loved, had come back. Nothing but the sight of him could have helped her. His touch would have healed her.

And Tomsk, with an unlooked-for delicacy, had at this point withdrawn, almost without a word of goodbye. He had made the long, tiresome journey to Sarmania for her sake, she knew.

And when he had described the ceremony that put

worlds between her and the man she loved the dwarf, who also loved her, had gone, as he had come, by the window, into the now black night.

In her flat high up in an old house in Paris Maria Drello sat and dreamed.

CHAPTER II

OVER an hour passed and she sat immovable in her chair, her hands curving over its arms, her eyes half shut.

The noises in the street took on another tone; they changed from the hum of preparation to the pleasant din of realized amusement.

Some one was playing a waltz in a house near by, and from further down the street there came from the orchestra of a cheap cinema the throb of a trombone and, from time to time, as the doors opened, a faint crash of music.

Maria did not hear; she was in Ipniz in Sarmania.

At last she was roused by the jarring of a bell; her door bell.

For a moment she sat still, and then, as it again pealed through the house, she rose, and with a peculiar gesture with both hands, as if she were disentangling herself from a delicate but clinging web, went to the door.

A man stood there, a tall man, at the sight of whom she involuntarily drew back a step.

He laughed. "Yes, it is I," he said, his teeth flashing in his dark face, "the eternal Vincenzo!"

"How do you do, Mr. Ferrari," she said quietly.

He followed her into the room, putting his hat and stick on a chair with an air of being thoroughly at home.

"I have come," he began, as he sat down, "to ask you to give me a sitting to-morrow if you can. I have got on very well, but I could do no more without you."

There is a mystery and poetry about lamplight. These two people in the comparatively pale light made a picture full of possibilities, their dark intent faces turned toward each other, the details of their clothes subordinate, as such things should be and never are where electricity reigns.

Maria's eyebrows had not stirred, yet she looked subtly as though she were frowning. The eternal Vincenzo, as he had called himself, was watching her as if far more than a sitting were in question.

At last she said slowly, "You know, Mr. Ferrari, I told you I couldn't come any more."

"Yes. That is," he corrected gently, "you were quite honest, and said that—you *wouldn't*."

"Well—then why do you ask me?"

"Why do I ask you?" He rose, and his voice as he answered her vibrated with passion. "Why? Because my picture of you is going to be a great picture. Because it is the best thing I have ever done. That is why!"

There was sincerity in his voice and the watchful look in her eyes softened to one of a curious kind of ashamed relief.

"I—I dislike posing," she faltered.

He did not speak, his silence forcing her to go on.

"But—Oh, well, yes, I'll come once more."

He bowed as he thanked her, and then asked her permission to smoke.

"You will come, say—from eleven till two?"

"Yes—I may be a little late, as my lesson is at ten-fifteen and your studio is so far away; but I'll be as punctual as I can."

"Thank you." He spoke perfect English with a faint accent that was attractive, and the rapid flash of his teeth as he smiled lent his face a charm that it lacked in repose, when it had a dogged expression almost amounting to sullenness.

He was a very tall man with a small head set on a rather thick neck; his hair curled in invincible little rings close to his head; his hair could not have been shorter unless he had shaved it, but the curls persisted, and gave him something of the appearance of the bust of some Roman Emperor.

His eyes were large, black, strongly lashed, but not beautiful; they were too bold, and rolled too much, as if they were loose in his head.

His hands were strong and well shaped, and very brown, although he lived chiefly indoors.

Maria, as she talked, hardly glanced at him. She knew too well how he looked.

But he looked at her all the more, sometimes only as a painter looks at his model, sometimes as some men look at women they love.

"Have you seen Ballington lately?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes."

His face clouded. "Has he been?"

She did not snub him for his curiosity; he was one of the men who always ask questions and nevertheless are rarely snubbed.

"No."

Although she did not reprove him, she enjoyed giving him no information, and she was not surprised when he lost his temper.

"By ——!" he shouted, jumping to his feet with an oath, "you will not tell me. Very well, I'll go!"

The Maria of two years and a half ago could not have smiled as she smiled now.

"Very well. Good-bye," she said slowly, her eyes narrowing.

She was playing with fire, and enjoying it, even though there were times when she feared it and dreaded the effect her foolhardiness was sure, sooner or later, to produce.

Vincenzo Ferrari stared at her, his loose eyeballs rolling from side to side.

Then, with a visible effort, he controlled himself. "I beg your pardon. I am an interfering brute. Only —I hate that man. He is a prig, and a sanctimonious blockhead."

Again she smiled. "Poor Sir Hubert. And he has such a high opinion of you! He said to-day that he was going to make you an offer for one of your pictures."

"Hein? Which one?" He eyed her suspiciously, and before she could answer, burst out, "I know. It is

the one—of you! Well, you tell him that I would sooner starve or be burned alive than let him have it!"

He was intensely angry, a curious twist of his mouth told her, and in one of his cheeks a pulse throbbed visibly.

"It is very simple," she returned; "you need only refuse to sell it to him."

His eyes fixed on her face, he remained silent for what seemed a very long time. Then slowly he smiled, and it was a dreadful, painful smile.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Drello. I am—as you know—a fool. It is, as you say, very simple. Forgive me."

These scenes were of frequent occurrence. The man was a violent, undisciplined creature whom she would, not long ago, have feared and disliked, but now, while she, to a certain extent, still feared him, she rather enjoyed the excitement.

On one day she would talk to him in a way that she knew increased the odd, vehement, rebellious feeling he had for her; the next, a recrudescence of her old self sent her back into her shell of reserve, causing her to avoid him when possible, to treat him with coldness, when he forced himself on her.

And Vincenzo Ferrari was a man very difficult to avoid. He was direct, bold, persevering, and in some ways remarkably thick-skinned, although sensitive to an abnormal degree in others.

Maria sat looking at him that evening as he talked about his work. He was consumedly egoistic, but his egotism was never a bore, and if an egoist escapes the

snare of boredom he is likely to be intensely interesting.

Presently Ferrari stopped talking and sat staring with his big eyes into the starlit night.

It was one of the moments when Maria felt dangerously drawn to him; she herself could not analyze the feeling. It was not love, it was not friendship; she would have liked to touch his elastic-looking curls, to put her hand on his forehead, which had one deep line, almost like a scar, across it from temple to temple.

He had never told her he loved her; he had never asked her to marry him. She knew, considering that for several months she had seen him two or three times a week, remarkably little about him.

She knew, she reflected, in the unembarrassing silence, only that he lived in a big, bare, ugly studio near the Place Pigalle; that he had, apparently, enough money to live in the way that pleased him; that he was an Italian—she did not even know his native city!—and that in certain moods he painted astoundingly well.

He was an abstemious man, eating little, and drinking nothing but water and vast quantities of café au lait; he lived, to all appearances, a very busy, decent life. And yet—there were moments when he frightened her, when she felt that she was on the brink of some terrifying discovery about him.

As he sat there that evening, disregarding her as if she had not been in the room at all, she studied him.

He wore shabby, well cut, dark blue clothes, and a

soft shirt of heavy white crêpe de chine—one of his peculiarities. The collar was of soft silk, and low almost Byronic; his tie was of blue silk.

He wore on his very long, narrow feet blue silk socks and shabby calfskin shoes.

He smelt of Russia leather, lavender, turpentine, and Turkish tobacco, of which he consumed unthinkable quantities, in the form of cigarettes, which he rolled himself.

Of all the men she knew in Paris, it was this queer, shabby, bold-eyed painter who best succeeded, without knowing it or the necessity for it, in driving from her mind the obsessive image of the King of Sarmania.

She was often annoyed, sometimes angry with him, but when most unhappy, most bitter, most lonely, it was to him she turned for a curious kind of distraction to which she could give no name. He had so utterly forgotten her now that she rose and went to the kitchen without his noticing it, and when a few minutes later she came back with some cups and her little brass and glass coffee machine on a tray, he started as if just awakened.

"Ah, that is good," he approved.

As the coffee machine boiled and bubbled, and she watched intently for the moment when the glass bulb could stand no more heat, he in his turn watched her.

"It's the dress," he said, "that is wrong."

"What dress?"

"The black, in the picture. I don't like you in black. Now, red—deep crimson would be better."

She laughed.

"Is that what you've been thinking about? You haven't spoken a word for nearly half an hour."

"No? I am sorry." Then he added, his eyeballs gleaming as a horse's sometimes do when the horse is uneasy, "No, I was not thinking about that then. But I am now. Have you got a crimson gown?"

"Of course I haven't. I never wear red."

She was quite at ease with him in these moods when he ignored her.

The coffee boiled up the classic three times, and she poured it into the shallow white cups.

"Have you seen the Darraghs lately?" she asked.

"No. I do not like Mrs. Darragh. I think she is a bad woman."

The directness of the charge was embarrassing, and Maria did not answer, except to say quietly, "I am dining there to-morrow."

He poured milk into his coffee, raising and lowering the jug until the mixture foamed almost like beer.

"So am I."

"If you think she is—bad—why do you accept her hospitality?" she asked.

"There! There you are! That is just what I always say—you English are so unpractical," he returned, with triumph, as if confirming some great truth. "I must dine, mustn't I? And Mrs. Darragh's being bad does not either concern or hurt me—why not dine there?"

He twisted the ends of his very small, dark mustache

that looked so oddly immature on his lined face, and laughed with delight, his teeth shining, as white as a dog's.

"Oh, I know—it is absurd trying to make you understand," she returned crossly, "you *can't* understand. But if you despise her——"

"I don't! I dislike her. I dislike all bad things."

"Then—why don't you tell her, and then you'd see whether she'd invite you any more!"

"Because you go there, and I must go where you go."

This was to himself apparently a perfectly conclusive and satisfactory explanation.

"But can't you *see*," she cried, rising in her exasperation, "that it is—taking her hospitality on false pretences? If she knew how you feel she, of course, wouldn't ask you."

He leaned across the little table and laid on her arm one of his small brown hands, on which shone the dull pale gold of a very old signet ring.

"She asks me to dine, Miss Drello," he said slowly, as if he were painstakingly enlightening a child, "not because she admires me, or because she thinks me good. She asks me because I am an amusing, good-looking man. She gives me a meal; I give her, in return, exactly what she wants, an attractively occupied chair at her table. It is a bargain."

Maria said no more. Their discussions usually ended in a deadlock such as this.

Presently he rose.

"Remember, if that man comes, I shall be rude to

him," he threatened. "I will not speak to him; I will r-r-roll my eyes at him——"

He was absurd now, and she laughed merrily.

"Oh, you great baby!"

He refused to smile. "Good-bye until to-morrow," he answered, still frowning, and took his leave abruptly.

She sat for a while thinking about him, as she often did. He interested and puzzled her, although she did not really like him. Sometimes she feared him, but to-night he had been at his best, and had amused her. As she rose and went to bed she smiled at the memory of his ferocity about Hubert Ballington.

CHAPTER III

FERRARI'S studio was at the top of an old house in the Rue de la Rochefoucauld.

Maria came to the Place Pigalle in a bus and then walked down the street. Madame Lys, the concierge, sat outside the door, in the shade, knitting.

She glanced at the girl with her usual expression of half malicious anticipation. "*Bon jour, Ma'mzelle,*" she said. "Monsieur is expecting you. He sent Zélie out for cakes and flowers."

Maria hated Madame Lys, and the precocious and inquisitive Zélie, her granddaughter, a fifteen-year-old child who was a "rat" at the opera.

She bowed coldly and started up the dark, interminable stairs.

She was tired and disheartened; her voice was not good, or rather, while her voice was good, the curious indescribable fault in her singing about which old Sulzer had puzzled his brain was at present very marked, and her master had spoken of it to-day.

She was a great worker, her industry never failing; she studied harmony, and counterpoint, and musical history; she read the lives of great musicians; she never had headaches, she never wept.

But she was not progressing as she should have done, and she knew it.

So it was one of her empty hours; hours when her life seemed an utterly useless thing, and the coming years barren wastes of inactive horror. She was glad to come to sit for Ferrari, for he, with his curious attraction for her, would distract her mind, and make her think of something besides her tiresome, unsuccessful self.

He it was who had made her realize her own beauty; even Fritz's admiration had not done that; he, Fritz, had often told her of it, but then he had loved her. This man, who had painted some such wonderful pictures; this man, capable of forgetting her while in her very presence; this man with his alternating moods of extreme vividness of perception and unconscious neglect, he it was who had shown her the value of her physical attributes.

He opened the door, with two brushes in his mouth, another in his right hand, and his palette in his left hand.

He gave her two fingers, bowed, muttered something that she could not catch, and went back to his work, which seemed to consist of walking backward and forward between an easel and a large chair, and stabbing his canvas occasionally with a dripping brush.

He wore no coat, and the beautiful muscles of his shoulders and back were, under the crêpe de chine of his shirt, almost as visible as those of his forearms, over which the sleeves were rolled back.

One of his wordless, busy moods, she saw.

She took off her hat and went into the next room to change her frock.

It was a dark back room, so she switched on the light. As she did so she gave a little cry.

On the bed, covered with a gorgeous piece of gold and purple brocade, lay a two-year-old child, fast asleep.

It was a beautiful, dark, southern-looking child, with a velvety brown skin and enormously long lashes.

Maria stood looking down at it, one of her splendid blushes sweeping over her, and then, as no sound came from the studio, she hurriedly changed into the black frock, turned off the light, and went back. Her chair was placed on the platform, and without a word she sat down and settled into her pose.

Ferrari glanced at her sharply, nodded, and went on working.

The room was large, full of piled up canvases, and conspicuous for its lack of the artistic litter that crowds so many studios.

There was a grand piano in one corner, and a huge boar hound lay asleep on the rug before the empty stone fireplace.

On the piano, and on a table, stood bowls of yellow roses, and pathetic, somehow, amid the neglected, dusty furniture, was a tea table with a lace-edged cover, a silver basket of cakes, and the usual paraphernalia arranged with great care.

"Don't mix your expressions," said Ferrari sharply "I want no pity in this picture——"

"I was only pitying myself for being painted by a dumb man——"

"You weren't. And now get your face right, or I may as well stop. Think about—lost glories, as you usually do."

Lost Glories! Was that how she looked?

"If," he added softly, "I could paint that blush! But I can't, so I must wait. *Why* did you blush?"

"I don't know; it's—just a habit. I always did it," she stammered.

"It is splendid."

He painted for nearly an hour, and for that long time, as long as professional models can sit without resting, she sat there, her hands curving over the lions' heads on the arms of the old carved chair.

Then he laid down his palette. "Good! Now come and have tea."

Going to the piano, he struck two chords, one in the bass, one in the treble.

"Bell's out of order," he explained, "so I call the witch that way."

Maria, very stiff and tired, descended from the estrade, and sat down on the sofa, near which the tea table stood. When Madame Lys appeared, bearing a kettle of boiling water and a tray on which were two little pink ices in paper boxes, Ferrari proceeded with great deftness to make the tea and pour it.

"It is terribly hot," he observed, "so, for me, I shall eat ices. You, Englishwoman, shall have tea. Would you like some bacon and eggs as well?"

He grinned suddenly at his own jest, which was an old one.

Maria did not answer. She was looking past him toward the bedroom door.

In the doorway stood the brown child, naked but for a little blue shirt, made in ridiculous imitation of a man's.

"Hello," the painter cried, "I had forgotten you! Come here, my son——"

The child approached. He was not at all shy, and he was frankly curious about the food on the table.

"*Habko na jsan jikor,*" he said slowly.

Ferrari burst out laughing. "And so you shall," he returned, "all you want. Come here."

He lifted the little boy to a chair, pushed it to the table, and piled cakes on a plate for him.

"What a beautiful child!" Maria said.

"Yes. His mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw," he answered absently, folding his arms as if he never meant to eat so long as he lived.

"What is his name?"

"Niklas."

The child ate the cakes without speaking. Then, turning to Maria, he said: "*Na jin sharpulmio Kavs.*"

She smiled at him. "What does he say?"

"He says are you his beautiful aunt?"

"But what language is it? It isn't Russian——"

Ferrari shook his head.

"No. It's Sarmanian."

She made a queer little sound and sank back against

the cushions, the blood ebbing from her face, leaving it white and drawn.

"What's the matter?" Ferrari was frightened by her aspect, and rose.

"Nothing," she answered, with an effort, "it is—only the heat——"

He hesitated for a moment, and then, going to a big black buffet, opened it with a key, and took from it a three-sided black bottle, from which he poured into a glass two fingers of a greenish liquor.

"Drink this, Miss Drello."

She obeyed, and in a moment was able to sit up and try to laugh.

"I have felt rather badly all day," she explained, "and it is very hot, isn't it?"

"No. It's cool now. Drink your tea," he returned bluntly.

The child, meantime, was eating more cakes, which were evidently to his entire satisfaction.

Maria drank her tea in silence, appalled at the strength of the feeling the knowledge of the child's nationality had roused in her.

She had tried in every way to forget Fritz and everything connected with him; she had tried by working, she had tried by being frivolous.

She, who had never flirted in her life, had deliberately attempted to learn how, and distract her mind as Fritz had confessed to her he had tried to do at one time.

And yet, nearly two years and a half after their parting, the sight of a Sarmanian child eating cakes

had turned her so faint that only the very strong liqueur Ferrari gave her had prevented her losing consciousness.

She was terrified, she was also intensely angry with herself.

"Whose child is he, Mr. Ferrari?" she asked, for the sake of asking something.

"Mine."

"OH!" In her surprise she blundered. "I never heard that you were married."

He shook his head absent-mindedly. "I'm not. Don't you think he'll die if he eats any more cakes?"

She had changed a good deal, but not enough to receive his communication without almost distressing embarrassment. Eagerly she snatched at the other subject. "I am *sure* he ought not to eat any more. Perhaps he'd like some milk!"

Ferrari turned to the child, and said something to him to which he replied vigorously in the negative, adding a few words at which the painter burst out laughing. "He says," he explained, "that he hates milk, but would like some cheese!"

"Yes. They all eat cheese in Sarmania," she answered.

He stared.

"What on earth do you know about Sarmania?"

She rose. "I must go now, it is late. About Sarmania? Oh, well, I have never been there; but I have a friend who has——"

Tomsk's heart would have leapt for joy at being called her friend.

"I see. Well—*Tsa ni koo lassna, Niklas*——"

"I shall see you to-night——"

Ferrari bowed. Then, as she reached the door, he said suddenly, as if it had just occurred to him that it might be as well to tell her, "Niklas' mother is married now. I haven't seen her for a year and a half——"

CHAPTER IV

"YOU had far better marry me, Maria——"

Sir Hubert Ballington spoke very quietly, so quietly, though with no air of mystery, that no one of the eight other people in the room heard him.

Dinner was over, and Maria sat on a little gilded sofa by the window opening into a flower-filled balcony.

Terence Darragh was a very successful mediocre painter, and spent a great deal of money in making his house pleasant.

The large room was very attractive with its well thought out lighting, its easy chairs, its beautiful Turkish and Persian carpets, some of which lay on the floor, some of which did duty as tapestry. It had been a pleasant dinner, one of those dinners that digest well mentally as well as physically; the guests were well chosen, the women good-looking and beautifully dressed, the men attractive.

Maria, in arriving, had felt a pang in seeing Ballington's tall figure bending down to his hostess, but in spite of his threats Ferrari had behaved fairly well, and narrowed his aggressions toward the man he hated to mere eye-rolling and a gruff voice.

Ferrari was happy that evening; Maria wondered if

was because of the presence, at home in his studio, the small Niklas.

And now, while the Italian talked to Darragh, in a rner, Ballington was again asking her to marry m.

"You are lonely," he said, "you are far from your rn people, you associate with people quite unworthy you. I don't ask you to love me, Maria, though if u marry me I shall try to make you, and I honestly lieve I can succeed——"

"Oh, Hubert," she murmured, honestly distressed.

"Yes, dear, I could succeed."

She raised her eyes to his face for a moment.

"I am fond of you now," she said slowly, "but I uld never love you."

He was a very patient man, as one saw in his well-d, reddish face, and steadfast gray eyes.

"Listen," he said. "Because I am quiet and—unro-ntic—and bald!—you think I don't know. But I I love you as—forgive my referring to it—you ed—Prince Fritz. You are my ideal, my romance, *in besseres ich.*' If you definitely will not marry me hall marry some one else, because I must. But I can er love that other woman as I love you. I shall rn to love her in a way—with respect, comradeship, n affection—but never as I love you.

'Now—don't speak yet—if you will marry me, I ı make you love me as I might love her—with re-ct, comradeship, and affection. And in the long ı, my dear, that is a great deal better than loneli-s. Think this over, will you?"

"It is no use——" Her eyes were wet, and not look up.

"It will be of use, if you put your mind on m Remember, even you will grow old, and—less b ful. And I am the man—no woman has more one such—who will love even your gray hairs wrinkles, when they begin to come."

If only, she thought fiercely, she had not gon Ferrari's studio that day. If only she had not s that detestable little boy. It had thrown her ba roused memories, imaginings, dreams, that hurt h almost beyond endurance.

"Oh, you are good, so good," she said, her voic rough with emotion, "I would give all I have in the world if I could—but——"

"Remember one more thing, my dear—my dear love," he concluded, "Prince Fritz is as dead for you as if you had seen him buried. If there were the remotest chance in the world of your marrying him I should go away and never see you again, but——"

"But there isn't. I know that. And I know, oh, how *well* I know that I am a fool, but—it's no use, Hubert."

Ferrari had gone to the piano, and as she finished speaking he began to play something of Debussy's; something crystalline, aqueous, woodland. He played well. An unbroken silence lay on the room, and so great was the charm of the music that people forgot each other, and even their own faces, which is very unusual.

Only the man at the piano did not forget. He, as he played, watched.

And he saw Ballington as he was, a sincere, kind, tenacious English gentleman; he saw Maria Drello amazingly handsome in her blue gown, her eyes full of dreams, her mouth bitter with a sorrow that for the moment would not be denied.

He saw, as his deft fingers crept delicately over the keys, weaving the queer, elusive melody woven by a big-bearded Frenchman, that so far as Maria was concerned Ballington did not exist.

And his dark face cleared as he played and watched. When the final chords, with their fascinating suggestion of dissonance, had died away, Ferrari rose.

"Miss Drello," he said, in English, "come out on the balcony with me and look at the stars——"

She obeyed without a word, and he drew two chairs out of eyeshot from those within the room.

"Did you say no?" he demanded, without prelude.

"Did I say no to what?"

"To—Sair 'Ubert Ballington."

She did not answer, and he went on unruffled:

"I saw him asking you to marry him, and I saw you say no."

"Will you ever learn," she retorted impatiently, "that there are some things better left unsaid?"

"No. Everything can be said. Everything. As to you, you said that you wished you could marry him, but that you couldn't."

She looked up at him as he stood, his tall, spare figure outlined against the sky. How did he know?

But she did not answer, and set her lips obstinately.

"Now," he continued, unmoved, "I am going to tell you a story. About me. . . . It is interesting."

She smiled faintly, and was about to reply, when he motioned her to be silent.

"Yes, about me, and it *is* interesting. Listen to it. Four years ago I was in the Balkans, sketching. I went to Montenegro, Servia, and finally to Sarmania. Sarmania, a little country whose name you would probably never even have heard if a friend of yours had not chanced to go there, is interesting because of its greenness. It is a grazing country, lying high up, surrounded by enormously high mountains. It is the greenest country in the world. Also, there is a cathedral there with a very fine ivory crucifix that *I* believe to be by Benvenuto.

"Well, I got to Ipniz, the capital, one May evening, and when I had had my dinner—roast kid, flavored with marjoram—I went out for a walk.

"The town is uninteresting, comparatively new, much like Servian towns of the second class. I sat down at a café in the principal *place*, ordered some beer, and began watching the people.

"There seemed to be two distinct kinds; the bourgeois were ordinary, dull-looking men and women, rather like Germans, only dark; then there were fellows I found afterward to be the peasants, tall, splendid men like Montenegrins, wearing sheepskin breeches, and belts full of knives and pistols of different sorts.

"I heard afterward that these people—the peasants—are very proud of their ancestry, a mixture of Latin

ınd barbarian—probably what was, later, Hungarian.

"I was tired, having tramped a good many miles hat day, and I was thinking of going to the hotel, to ıed, when a man and a girl came in and sat down at a able near me.

"They were of the better bourgeoisie, as far as lothes went, but I saw at once that she really be-ɔnged to the mountaineer lot.

"She was—beautiful, and I fell in love with her at hat moment—as I had never been in love before. I tared at her and she stared back. Bound to, we were ıade for each other. The man was much older than he, and I knew at once that he was not her husband. t was quite plain what she was. I followed them home —over a chemist's shop it was, that they lived—and he next day I watched.

"She knew I would, and she was on the lookout.

"About eleven she came out, alone, and walked like ıe very deuce to a kind of park there is, half-way up ıe hill on which the Royal Palace stands.

"It was empty at that hour, in the blaze of heat, ıd we talked. I told her I loved her and that she ust come with me. She said she would."

He paused, and Maria asked, in spite of herself, And she, did she love you?"

"Yes—in a way. At all events she was tired of her d man, so the next day we left Ipniz together, and ent to Cettinje; I was out of my mind with joy. She as as beautiful as—as you. And she was a born ıgabond. We had two years of happiness, and then iklas was born. She didn't want him, and was furi-

ous and bad-tempered. I used to beat her sometimes, but it did no good. It usually," he added, with perfect calm, "does. So she went away. I was crazy with despair for a while and then I met you. Will you marry me?"

She looked at him, unable to reply. In spite of herself, against her judgment, she knew that she could marry this mad, wild creature more easily than she could Sir Hubert Ballington. Yet she feared Ferrari.

She blushed and paled without answering him, and then suddenly he stooped, took her chin in his hand and kissed her mouth.

Before she could move his arms were round her holding her tight, and he had drawn her to her feet.

"Maria," he said thickly, "love me. Let yourself go and love me——"

He kissed her again and she seemed for a moment powerless to resist him; what was worse, she knew she did not want to resist him.

It was, then, this that she had been afraid of.

Suddenly he dropped his arms and drew away from her. "Some one is coming," he said.

CHAPTER V

MARIA did not see Ferrari again for some time, and that for no lack of enterprise on his part. He was, as has been said, a man of immense perseverance, and in this case he bent all his will to forcing her to an interview.

But he failed, although one of his moves nearly vanquished her.

One morning there arrived for her a box of roses with a note. The note, scrawled with every appearance of haste on a half sheet of paper, in pencil, said simply: "Very well. I shall not try to see you. Your refusing encourages me more than an interview might. You are evidently afraid of my power over you! Ferrari."

This master stroke, of course, annoyed her extremely, but with much wisdom she maintained her silence, and when five days later he gave up his new plan and called, he was as usual told that she was not at home.

What he had said was true. She did fear him, or rather she feared, in herself, that which he roused.

She loved Fritz; this man she not only did not love, but she did not even like him; yet he had a strong influence over her, and she was at times be-

set by a positive terror lest she should give in, and marry him.

He was, for one thing, the only creature on earth who had ever made her forget Fritz for one moment; and besides this there was the unwilling, shamed response of her lower nature to his.

When he had kissed her she had repulsed him; she had, later in the evening, found the opportunity of expressing to him a violent indignation and sense of insult. But—she knew that a large part of this indignation was insincere.

And the knowledge frightened her.

For his part, Ferrari played fair according to his peculiar code; he wrote, he went to her door and clamored for admittance, but he never spoke to her in the street. Unmolested she went to her various lessons, and returned home from them.

It was a situation whose singularity is difficult to describe.

It seems absurd that a healthy, independent young woman should not be able, after refusing to marry him, to avoid any further intercourse with a man. It seems absurd that she should, as the saying goes, bother her head any longer about him.

It seems as absurd that a man should refuse to accept a refusal of marriage and go on tormenting the girl who refused him.

And yet these things were.

Ferrari knew perfectly well the effect he had on Maria Drello; it was, in fact, much the same effect that she had on him. He also knew that she was a

good woman, morally. It had never occurred to him to suggest to her anything short of matrimony.

And knowing all he knew, being what he was, he went his way, weaving plans with the cunning of his nationality, executing them with the explosive suddenness peculiar to his own nature.

Ballington had gone back to England, and of this the Italian was glad.

"He is your good genius, you are thinking," he once wrote to Maria, "and I am your bad! You will marry me yet, because I will make you. Perhaps I shall beat you if you disobey me; but I think you will not disobey me——"

The girl was thoroughly wearied out with this odd wooing, when all of a sudden the wooer changed his tactics once more.

He not only stopped calling, he stopped writing; she neither saw, heard from, nor even heard of him, for ten days.

The De Breux's, a musician and his wife, who were his best friends, asked her to dine with them at a restaurant one evening, and his name was not mentioned until the meal was nearly over.

To her own intense annoyance Maria found herself suddenly devoured by curiosity regarding him.

Several times she led the talk to his direction, but with no result; they mentioned several other painters, talking of their work, expositions, etc., but Ferrari was never once referred to.

At last Maria heard herself ask, "And what has become of Mr. Ferrari?"

Mariette de Breux raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, Jacques, what *has* become of Vincenzo?"

De Breux, a little fat man with a wen on his nose and two double chins that went straight round his neck and bulged over his collar at the back, pursed his lips.

"Gone away," he said, with solemnity.

"But where?" his wife insisted.

He shrugged his shoulders with a weighty air of innocent ignorance. "*Qui sait?* He has not confided in me."

"Then how do you know?" Maria was not wily enough to wonder at Madame de Breux's unusual curiosity.

"I know because I saw him a week ago, in a taxi, with a trunk by the chauffeur and a portmanteau——"

"Beside him," interrupted his wife, glancing at Maria.

"No," de Breux smiled slightly. "The portmanteau was *not* beside him——"

After a moment, as Maria's eyes betrayed that she understood nothing of what he meant her to understand, he added, "I couldn't see who it was with him —a very thick veil, you understand!—but it looked a merry little party, *ce brigand de Vincent!*"

The worthy people, who adored each other, and were bringing up their two daughters in almost cloistral ignorance, watched with cynical amusement the overwhelming blush that the singular Miss underwent as the gist of their story finally reached her dense island intelligence.

On their way home Madame de Breux, her hand

under her husband's arm, remarked to him, "My little Jacques, she will marry him yet, ce pauvre Vincent!"

"Do you think so? I think he was wrong in having us tell her. She was not jealous; she was—shocked."

"Yes, she was shocked, but women do not blush like that unless there lies in them, somewhere, the germ of a possible jealousy."

She was right. Maria was, in spite of her resolution never to see him again, bitterly angry with Ferrari, and as to the lady in the thick veil, she hated her.

In the last year she had learned much of that side of life to which many people give the generic term with a capital—"Life," as if the relation of the sexes were all the word meant.

But, naturally, she had learned wrongly, and she was still much more ignorant than are most modern girls.

Behind the thick veil so artfully introduced to her imagination by De Breux she saw bistred eyes, layers of liquid powder, glossy cherry lips. And she was insulted by these things, illogically, foolishly insulted. She remembered Ferrari's kissing her, imagined him kissing the woman with the thick veil, and—it was not the kisses he had given her that now enraged her; it was those others, those on the cherry lips.

She wondered where Ferrari had taken that other woman; were they somewhere in the mountains, where it was cool, where there was no asphalt that felt soft under one's weary feet; where the blazing sun was not refracted from ugly plaster houses and walls, doubly to torment one's aching eyes?

Or—the sea? Were they by the sea?

It seemed years since she had sat on soft sand and listened to waves.

At last it came home to her that she was jealous, contemptibly jealous, because she did not love the man whose being with another woman caused her such miserable pain.

Deeply ashamed of herself, she lay awake the whole night trying, as she thought, to come back to her senses.

She would work harder than ever; she would begin Russian lessons, so that she could sing the beautiful Russian songs young Zamaroff sang; she would learn fencing; she would take three diction lessons a week instead of two; she would not be such a beast.

Her mind, meantime, was as pure as a child's.

She had not the slightest idea that her jealousy of Ferrari was the physical jealousy that leads to so many crimes. She thought with fury of his being with the lady of the thick veil; she imagined them walking together in shady lanes, talking in cool places; she even pictured them dining at a little table, as she herself had once dined with him, and she saw him leaning over the table and looking at his companion with his onyx-like, brown-lidded eyes as he had looked at her; but her imagination went no further.

She passed a wretched, wakeful night, furious with and puzzled by herself, and when in the morning a letter came in Ferrari's writing, she locked it away in a drawer without reading it.

Two days later, as she sat over her after-luncheon

coffee, the door opened and Ferrari came quietly into the room.

"My dear," he said, with great gentleness, "I thank you."

Seeing her amazement, he went on, "I knew you would not answer my note, I knew you'd let me come."

He was very well dressed in gun-metal-colored flannels, and looked handsomer than she had remembered him to be.

"I didn't answer your letter," she said slowly, "because I didn't read it."

It was his turn to look amazed, and he did so.

Rising, she opened the drawer and gave him the letter.

He looked at it, then at her, and then, slowly tearing the envelope, handed her the single sheet of paper it contained.

> "Unless I hear from you definitely—this time I shall believe you—that you wish never to see me again," she read, "I will come on Thursday. I love you. VINCENZO."

"Oh!"

Her little cry was as unaffected as a child's. She had had her chance and missed it! She could have escaped and had failed.

"I cannot marry you, Mr. Ferrari," she said steadily, after a desperate pause.

"Why?"

"Because—I love some one else."

He smiled, his sudden broad grin, in which his even, milk-white teeth made him look so young.

"Oh, yes; you will marry me."

She shook her head, too tired to answer. It was as if she had been running and was exhausted.

"I have been away with a woman," he said brutally. "She is beautiful, and young. And she loves me. She loves me so much, the little dear, that she tried to stab me when I left her. Look!"

Ripping open his cuff, he showed on the white skin of his forearm a long, red scratch.

"Oh, yes," he added; "you will marry me——"

It must be remembered that she was poor, and lonely, and absolutely without hope regarding the man she did love.

For a moment she was tempted almost beyond her strength to give in to her curious suitor; to give up the uneven fight in which so much of her seemed to be on his side. She looked at him tentatively, and then as he slowly approached her, his face white, his boyish-looking teeth hidden by a grimly closed mouth, she drew back.

"No, no, Mr. Ferrari," she stammered, "I—I cannot——"

With a bow he left her.

CHAPTER VI

LONDON lay palpitating in the heat that had prevailed for the last month.

Prostrate people lying thick on the grass in the parks presented the appearance of a plague-smitten population waiting for the death carts; horses toiled with sweat-darkened bodies and anxious eyes; dogs' tongues seemed to stretch elastically as they panted; men were pale and irritable, and those women who use lip salve regarded themselves anxiously in small mirrors and wiped smeared mouths on the edges of their handkerchiefs.

The heat was overpowering, and sometimes a dust-charged wind, hot as a wind from the desert, swept like a blight over the town, whitening still more the suffering trees.

One afternoon at tea time old William Drello was sitting under his cedar, busy with a picture puzzle. He wore his planter's hat and an ancient suit of white linen.

The heat had tried him, and he looked very diaphanous and fragile, while the veins in his hands were nearly black.

He had changed a good deal in the last two years and a half, although he was not a very old man, but

as the sound of the garden door opening reached him his look up was as sudden and brilliant as ever.

"Maria!" His quiet face seemed to waken suddenly as she came across the grass to him.

"Father, dear," she said, smiling, "are you so glad as that to see me?"

"My dear, my dear—glad?"

His arms were still strong as he held her to his breast, his old head, tall as she was, topping hers by several inches.

"My dear, you must be tired to death, traveling in this heat, and," the inexpugnable English instinct forced him to add, "you must be dying for your tea!"

She laughed and sat down. "Thanks, I had some at Dover."

The cabby and a broken-down 'Varsity man, with a red nose and an aged pair of dress trousers, were bringing in her luggage.

When Thimblebee opened the door to them and beheld Maria the old woman forgot the luggage, and her manners, and rushed across the sunburned lawn and kissed the girl whom she regarded in a way as nearly her own child.

There was comfort in her homely welcome to the weary girl; as she sat there drinking the tea that the old servant insisted on making for her Maria wondered why she had not come home before. How she could have ignored Lurty's letter of a few weeks back; how she could have failed to see that it was here that she belonged.

The old house, the same old chintz in the windows,

the homely flowers drooping in the baked earth, and the black shade of the cedar; all these things seemed to welcome and soothe her.

"And how are you, my dear? And the voice?"

"I am well, but tired. I have been working very hard. It's opera now, you know."

He nodded. "And when will your début be?"

"I don't know, father. My voice has grown much heavier, and is a little hard to manage. I know twelve operas, and have some very good days, but—there are bad days, too."

Then he told her his news. "I can't get used to Fazzy's death, my dear. I miss him incredibly. And our poor Jacqueline has changed very much—quite naturally. You will find her quite different, poor girl."

"I am sorry. How about Fred?"

"Married. Very well, too, a good deal of money. But I never could endure women with white eyelashes. They were here on Sunday. Every one," he added, with a wistful smile, "is very kind about coming to see me."

Maria felt a pang of remorse. Every one but his daughter! And even now she had come not on his account, but on her own.

"Dear father," she said gently, "I fear you have been very lonely."

He laughed. "Well, yes—but better be lonely than bored, my dear!"

"What about Lurty?"

"Lurty is doing fairly well; he writes lucrative tosh for the papers—he is getting fat."

"Dear me!"

After a minute she added, "And Doris?"

"Doris," the beautiful old man answered with serenity, "is a little——"

It was a word Maria had never heard used except by certain dog-fancying ladies who pride themselves on not being mealy-mouthed.

"Good gracious, father!"

He nodded. "Yes, she is. I always disliked her and I was right."

"But—what does she do?"

"Wastes money and flirts. Has the flat full of useless youths with varnished heads and five words in their vocabulary—they are called, I am told, nuts."

Maria burst out laughing at his eloquence, but he was perfectly serious.

"Lurty," he went on, "says nothing, but I can see that he is uneasy. And the baby, poor little thing, looks ill and neglected. Perhaps you may be able to make her behave herself."

Maria frowned. It was all very well to come home for a change, and an escape from worries; it was another to take up the burden of a vulgarly unsuccessful *ménage*.

Presently she went into the house and up to her room.

It touched her to see how carefully Thimblebee had kept everything just as she had left it.

Nothing had been moved; there was even, on a table, an absurd little toy—a pig made of twisted pink wire, that some child had given her a day or two before

she had gone away, and which she had put down and never again thought of.

The yellow walls were possibly a little more faded, otherwise the room was unchanged.

Whereas—she!

She stood before the glass in which she had watched herself the day she tried on her wedding veil, and again studied her own face.

Under her small traveling hat it looked pale and drawn. There were dark marks under her eyes, and from the nose to the corner of the mouth faint lines began to show; she looked older than her age, in these her plain moments, and there was, moreover, an almost bitter expression in the eyes that used to be so serene, even in their sorrow.

"I am," she said aloud, "deteriorating."

But the next day she found that her looks were considered to have improved.,

She was much thinner, and a night's rest had freshened her face, so that Lurty, and even Doris, complimented her on her appearance.

"It's something in the Paris air," Doris explained, "every one who stays there long enough gets to look French. Englishwomen are so lumpy."

"You are not lumpy," remarked Maria, surveying her sister-in-law's little person, thin almost to emaciation.

"Oh, me, no, I'm a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair."

"Have you dyed your hair?"

"Nonsense, of course I haven't. Lurty," she added,

with an access of extreme domesticity, "wouldn't let me."

"It's quite a different color."

"It's some herb tonic I put on it; it falls out so."

Maria said no more, but she was shocked by the little woman's appearance.

Doris' small face was carefully made up, her lips were oily with lip salve of the wrong shade. She looked nervous, ill, and flashy.

Lurty for his part was, as his father had said, putting on weight.

He was very busy writing, and inclined to consider himself a literary man.

Mr. Maurice Hewlett's last book had the misfortune not to please him, and Mr. Arnold Bennett he considered an overrated writer, but a genius as to advertisement.

Lurty was pompous, rather absurd, and a bore, but he was her brother, and Maria was seized with pity for him as he held forth.

There were premature lines in the young man's face, and he was irritable and nervous.

When Maria had been shown the flat—a new one into which the young people had recently moved—Doris went to lie down, as she was dining out, and was tired.

"Ah," Lurty said suddenly, "here's the lift. That'll be the boy!"

There was in his voice a thrill that touched his sister. He opened the door and stood waiting until the lift came up. He took charge of the ornate white pram,

pushed it into the little hall, and lifted the baby out with skill and pride.

"There, Maria, isn't he a beauty?"

The baby, a pale, bluish little creature with a bulging brow that looked as thin as an eggshell, smiled at him and made some remark in Babese, at which Lurty's eyes glowed with pleasure.

"Awfully intelligent, he is, you know, Maria! Only nine months old, and look at him! Well, old man, are you hungry? Want your whisky and soda, eh?"

The little nurse had disappeared, and Lurty carried the baby into his study and, with a skill that seemed to his sister very touching, took off its cap and cloak.

"He was rather delicate at first," he went on, "but he's going on famously now. Do you think he looks like me? Many people do."

Maria knelt down by him suddenly, and putting her arms round the baby, kissed her brother's flabby cheek. "Oh, Lurty," she murmured, "Oh, Lurty, my dear old boy."

He stared at her for a moment in sheer amazement, then he compressed his mouth in a way he had done when he was a child when he was trying not to cry. And slowly Lurty Drello's eyes filled with tears.

The nurse came in at that moment with the baby's bottle, and Lurty left the room.

Neither he nor Maria ever referred to the strange, swift little scene, but neither of them ever forgot it.

It had drawn them, for a fraction of a moment, nearer together than they had ever been in their lives,

and it had brought to both the curious thrill of tainty that a sudden realization of the meanin the blood tie always does bring.

They were two unlike creatures, living different distant lives. They each of them loved a third p better than they loved the other.

But they were brother and sister.

CHAPTER VII

HE heat went on steadily. Every day masses of luminous white clouds that looked as though they were lined with copper gathered sky, but only slowly to separate, disintegrating, their metallic look, their look of promise of er and lightning and the longed-for rain.

e jaded trees drooped under their plague of dust; nell of stale petrol hung like a vast vapor in the s; the parks were left by the children of the well- to the children of the badly-to-do; babies pale crawny cared for, on the withered grass, smaller, babies.

ndon was empty. Society had gone away, and in reat western squares poor people crawled about e evening looking through the railings beyond they might not penetrate.

retakers scattered together at sundown, queer old ures with few teeth and dusty black hats so de- d by the vicissitudes of their careers that their naker would not have known them.

om the great houses sallied forth occasionally ous men in their shirt sleeves. Butlers. Butlers n charge.

ese gentlemen, bowled over by the 'eat, seemed to

lose, as they gently perspired, something of their terrible dignity.

Their families—not their own flesh and blood families, but those of the world's great people whom they served—were away—in Scotland, or on the Continent, for the most part.

Young footmen confided to each other over beer that, after all, the old chief wasn't such a bad fellow when the family was away. Quite h'affable at times, Mr. Stebbins was.

And those curious public houses at which the servants of rich people have their clubs were, during that time of unbearable heat, the source of great profit to their owners.

Politics were discussed over pint pots or whiskies and sodas, and Mr. Lloyd George's adherents and enemies fought about him with an ardor as great as that of the masters at whose tables the quick-eared butlers and footmen had heard so much more, and understood so much more, than the masters dreamed of.

A dearth of ladies is, one understands, the chief drawback to smart servantdom in August.

The ladies' maids, of course, have gone, housekeepers are usually of a ripe age, and butlers cannot associate with housemaids.

Yet, as the long, stifling evenings became night, lovers wandered about the deserted West End.

Amiable policemen looked the other way as the poor souls who lived in other people's houses kissed each other in the dusk; it was the one time of the year when

domestic servants have any disposal of their own time, and there comes every midsummer a pathetic atmosphere of romance, a kind of glamour, that one feels strongly as one realizes what it means to those who work as domestic servants.

Maria Drello was fond of walking, and every evening when the comparative coolness came she used to wander about trying to interest herself in observing the lives of other people.

The heat exhausted her. She grew very thin, and, for the first time in her life, looked really ill. She was very lonely, too, and wished that she had made friends when she was younger.

Barbara Gryce was literally her only girl friend, and Barbara would not be back until the end of September.

At first Maria went often to Lurty's flat, but she soon found that she was unwelcome to Doris, who was hectically gay, and occupied with a band of male beings whom she called her "boys."

The baby liked his tall aunt, and allowed her to help him through a very bad time with a tooth; but, though Doris was too busy with her boys to have much time for her baby, she was jealous of his liking for Maria, and made herself, in consequence, disagreeable.

"I love to be with him, Lurty," Maria explained to her brother, "but it annoys Doris, so I don't come often."

Lurty nodded. He was growing fat in an unwholesome way, as if the heat were causing him to expand artificially. "I say, Maria," he added suddenly,

"what do you think about Becker? That chap who wears a monocle?"

"I don't think anything about him, Lurty."

"Well, I do. He's making love to Doris. Fellows do, you know." There was a lamentable kind of pride in his voice. "She's so pretty."

"She paints, and I wish she wouldn't," Maria answered. "It makes her look, for one thing, years older than she is."

Lurty gave a doubtful grunt. "Oh, well, as to that —they all do it."

"Who?"

"All her friends. The new ones. That Miss Pellow is the niece of an earl."

Maria sighed. "Oh, Lurty!"

"What d'you mean with your 'Oh, Lurty'? Suppose you think I'm a snob, do you?"

The poor young man was resentful and pettish, and his sister was deeply sorry for him.

A few days later she met Doris and Mr. Becker in the Embankment Gardens.

Doris' air of unconsciousness and ease made Maria uneasy, although to the strong, young woman with her red blood and good muscle, Mr. Cholmondely Becker, a narrow slice of undeveloped manhood, looked as harmless as a mosquito. Maria could have picked him up and walked off with him, had occasion arisen.

Mr. Becker was dressed with much care in pale gray, and he smelt of what he probably believed to be violet essence, but what attained with more perfection to the scent of the vanilla bean.

"Hullo, Maria," her sister-in-law called out with a nervous assumption of bonhomie; "what an odd place to find you!"

"I often come here; I am fond of the river. Oh, yes, how do you do, Mr. Becker?"

"Chummy and I are looking for some air," pursued Doris volubly. "*Isn't* it hot?"

Maria went her way rather sadly. Lurty was not a very fine man, but he loved his wife and he adored his baby. Was his home going to disintegrate because a worm like this Becker boy chose to amuse himself! She walked slowly along the Embankment and finally sat down on a bench and watched the gathering of stormy-looking clouds that were beginning to darken the sky.

Things were coming to a crisis with Maria; to one of those irresistible crises that gather in one's soul, without any extraneous pressure.

Outwardly her life had gone on from day to day for over three weeks without its monotony being broken by an event of any kind.

She had played cribbage with her father, helped him in his work of going through James Crossfield's letters and deciding which of them he would sell when poor Jacqueline, who had had another stroke, should be gone.

She had allowed Thimblebee to give her an extremely detailed and tiresome history of the household and its branches since her departure.

Thimblebee was garrulous and her memory was bad, but Maria had tried to be interested in the tale of poor

Jessie's disastrous marriage, which was one of the marriages which ain't rightly to be called marriages at all, being bigamy; she had been told every detail about the funeral of Ellen, Thimblebee's only sister.

Ellen had been cremated, and Maria was told all about the difficulties contingent on this ceremony.

The cooks—Mrs. Barker, Agnes Fieldman, and the present one, Mrs. Hatch, were all described in full. Maria was dreadfully bored and angry with herself for so being, but she listened.

When it came to Lurty, the old woman became very indignant. "I never liked 'e, Miss Maria," she declared, her flat eyelid twitching with excitement; "and no more did Master. I told Lurty so. 'Master Lurty,' I says, 'she's not the young lady your mother would 'ave picked out for you.'"

"But mothers don't often pick out their sons' wives."

"And a great pity it is! Well, Nurse tells me——"

It appeared that, for all her extravagance in dress and things of that kind, Doris was mean with her servants and kept a sharp eye on the larder.

Maria explained to Thimblebee that she could not listen to tales about her brother's wife.

"What's true isn't tales," the old woman maintained.

* * * * * * *

She, too, had failed, Maria remembered, as she sat on the bench recalling their conversation.

Everyone seemed to have changed far more since she went to Paris than the mere lapse of time war-

ranted. Only her father seemed the same, and he in spite of physical weakness.

She was, she realized with great keenness, an unusually lonely woman.

She was not yet twenty-four, but she felt as if she had left her youth here, only to find it, as she found everything else, changed and aged.

Then her mind wandered off to Hubert Ballington.

She sincerely wished she could have married him, but she could not—ever.

And he would marry someone else, as he had told her he would, and she would probably never see him again.

Ferrari? Involuntarily she smiled as she thought of him. Here in London she felt quite safe from him. His charm did not carry across water!

She had hardly thought of him at all since she had been in England.

Why, she wondered, had he ever fascinated her, as he undoubtedly had?

She did not love him; and yet——

Slowly, painfully, she tried to find out what it was.

Her mind was a slow one, and she sat on and on in the gathering gloom, her hands clasped on her lap, unconscious that passers-by gazed at her, unconscious that the footsteps she heard grew quicker and quicker, that the clouds had settled down in a solid gray mass, that a storm was on the point of breaking.

"If I go back to Paris," she was thinking, "he will come to see me. And—he is so unexpected—there's no knowing what he'd do! If—if he kissed me"—a little shiver crept over her. "I must not marry him,"

she whispered resolutely, her lips barely moving, "I must not. It would be wrong."

And then she became aware of more footsteps.

A sound of deliberate feet, treading slowly. She knew, although she had only unconsciously heard them, that all the recent sounds of footsteps had been hurried, that these were different.

Her heart gave a throb and she felt her bosom and face flushing.

"It is he," she thought, with a little gasp in her dry throat. "*C'est lui*, Ferrari," without knowing it thinking in the language of his *milieu*.

"Why not just let go, and marry him?"

She was so lonely, so tired of being alone, and Fritz was gone.

The footsteps had reached her, and, looking up, she saw—nothing.

Then, looking down, she beheld, framed in his umbrella, Tomsk.

CHAPTER VIII

THE dwarf's face, grown woefully thin and white, looked almost luminous in the setting of his umbrella, and his jaw had dropped in sheer amazement.

For a moment he could not speak. Then he gasped out with a curious rattle in his voice, "Miss Drello!"

"Yes, it is I, Mr. Tomsk. How do you do?"

He made a sudden low bow, like the bow of a child.

"I am—as you see. But come, we must run!"

Glancing, now thoroughly roused, at the ominous sky, she saw for the first time that a storm was impinging.

She rose. "I hadn't noticed," she murmured; "but where are we to go?"

A sharp crack of thunder, as if a great jerk had ripped the fabric of the sky, answered her.

"Oh!" Maria started violently. "I must get a taxi."

But the dwarf, standing as tall as he could, tried to cap her with his umbrella.

"Run," he said, "to *my* house, just up the street, there."

It was one of the appalling, almost tropical, storms that sometimes end a prolonged period of unusual heat. The lightning was of the zigzag, awful kind, rarely

seen in England, and the thunder, following immediately on the flashes, was terrifying.

Tomsk scuttled away at an incredible speed, and Maria, under his umbrella, which he had forced into her hand, followed him.

The streets were empty but for their two so dissimilar figures, when the rain came down, hissing on the hot world.

Maria ran as she had not run for years, and in a very few minutes she stood panting for breath in a narrow lodging-house entry, leaning against a wall papered with a lively, if inaccurate, imitation of pink marble.

Tomsk turned on the light by jerking a wee chain that hung from the gasolier, and hung his hat on a cherry-wood rack.

The little man was trembling with fatigue and excitement.

"Listen!" he exclaimed, holding up his hand.

It was to the rain that he referred; to rain that positively roared as it fell.

Maria nodded. "Yes, I was sitting there—thinking—and didn't notice the sky. It's very kind of you, Mr. Tomsk, to have brought me here."

"It is," he returned, with a profound bow, "an honor for me. You will allow me to give you some tea, while they are getting you a taxi—there is no telephone and the maid must go to the public-house at the corner."

Maria accepted his invitation, touched by the delicacy of its mode of expression.

"I shall love some tea," she returned gently, "and please don't send anyone to telephone until the rain stops."

The dwarf, with another bow, led the way up the narrow staircase, where a smell of cabbage seemed to hang like something solid, and, opening the door of the front room, ushered in his guest.

On the threshold Maria paused, nearly uttering an exclamation of surprise.

It was a fairly large room, very clean, with dark red walls and a Turkey carpet. There were two highly polished mahogany tables, an upright piano, a chesterfield, and two armchairs, and all these things were of an almost abnormally large size.

The chesterfield might have bedded a giant.

"I am proud," Tomsk said, turning and facing her, "to welcome you to my home. And," he added consequentially, "I am glad that there are flowers."

This ceremony over, he made her sit down in a vast *bergère*, in which even she looked small, and rang the bell.

While he communed with his landlady on the matter of tea, Maria quietly studied the room.

The immense size of the furniture, a kind of indescribable pomposity in its arrangement, rendered it almost ridiculous, but, Maria recognized with surprise, it was the room of a gentleman.

Tomsk's queer ways, as well as his queer looks, had hitherto blinded her incurious eyes to the fact that he was anything more than an excellent accompanist and an irascible little creature to be pitied.

But now her pity was suddenly increased tenfold. The little creature was cultivated; he loved books; the two or three pictures on the walls were distinctly good, and the ikon in its corner was, she decided, probably of great value.

"Well, you like my room?"

She started. The landlady had gone and Tomsk stood before her, gazing up at her with anxious eyes.

"It is a beautiful room."

He nodded. "Yes, it is beautiful. For its size, there is no finer room in London."

As he spoke he scrambled with a hideous effort into the other armchair, and leaned back in it, panting. "I have," he announced proudly, "a valvular disease of the heart."

"Oh, Mr. Tomsk!"

"Yes. I go once a month to see Sir William Tilney, who is a friend of mine—I call him Bilney—and he is much concerned about me. Don't you think," he continued anxiously, "that I look very ill?"

Her eyes filled, quite unexpectedly, with tears. He was so comic in his peculiar vanity.

"You are very pale," she faltered.

He nodded violently, peering out of the shadow of the chair, his eyes brilliant, "And thin, Miss Drello."

Before it was necessary for her to respond to this piece of information he went on: "You, too, are pale. Are you not well?"

"Thanks, I'm all right, only I don't like the awful heat."

The rain went on, though the lightning and thunder

were over. The window, behind its cheap lace curtains, darkened rapidly.

And while Tomsk and his guest waited for their tea he talked to her.

"There," he began, pointing to two old-fashioned photographs in new frames that stood on the mantelpiece, "are my mother and father. She was very beautiful, my mother. She was disappointed in me because I was small. My father killed himself before I was born. No reason. Just despondency. Despondency is a terrible thing. Vesterhof, who painted the beautiful pictures in the cathedral at Kieff, was my godfather. Of course, you never heard of him, but he is great, for all that. You never heard of Verepletchnikof either, did you?"

"No."

He nodded. "Of course you haven't, but his work will one day be compared to Titian's. Well, these are great men. It is a pity," he added thoughtfully, his beautiful white hands clasped under his chin, "that you know no Russian."

"I am no great reader, I fear," she smiled, "in any language."

As he discoursed of Chekhof, of Blamont, of Sologub, she studied him.

Seated there in the great chair, the chair arm throwing a shadow over the lower part of his body, she saw that his large head was a fine one; the head of a poet. In the chalky pallor of his face there was for the moment no trace of the oddness that had to her hitherto been his chief characteristic.

It was the face of a suffering man with an unusual intellect.

The pity of it was very poignant to the girl, who, in her observance of it, for the moment forgot her own obsessing and selfish misery.

"Verhaeren, too," he was saying. "Oh, Miss Drello, I have copied a little verse of his for you—I did not know where to send it."

He shot down from his chair with stiff knees, as children descend from a height, and marched across the room to the writing-table, whence he brought back a square white card, ornamented round the edges with a very elegant pen and ink arabesque.

She took it, and, as she read it, flushed deeply.

ZÉLANDE

C'était par ces soirs d'or de Zélande
Où les parents disent aux enfants
Que les Jésus vont sur la mer.

" 'Que les Jésus vont sur la mer,' " Tomsk repeated in a deep, soft voice, "isn't it beautiful?"

She nodded.

"It reminded me," he resumed, standing humbly before her, "that if things had gone well with you, you might one day have told *his* children that in the evening light Jesus walks on the water."

She rose with an inarticulate cry of pain.

"Oh, *don't!*"

His face changed to a look of severity. "I hope you are religious, Miss Drello?"

"I—Oh, I don't know. I must go now, Mr. Tomsk, the rain is nearly over."

But as she spoke the landlady brought in tea, and Tomsk's mind skipped neatly and suddenly to affairs of hospitality.

"These little cakes are very good. Mrs. Benson makes them from a recipe I gave her. They are Russian cakes, and my samovar belonged to my grandmother!"

The tea was excellent, as were the little cakes.

"Miss Barbara? You have seen her?" Tomsk asked, as he busied himself with the samovar.

"No; she is still away."

"And Herr Sulzer?"

"She is with him, you know. But—don't you accompany for him any more, Mr. Tomsk?"

"No. And will you not, in the Russian way, call me Alexander Grigorovitch?"

"Our English way is so much simpler!"

"But so unfriendly. Please, Miss Drello."

To please him she tried, and he laughed with delight at her pronunciation.

"You have a great many books," she observed presently, rising and taking up her hat.

"Yes. I love reading. Ah, I wish you could read Russian. If I copy you out some beautiful things from 'The Golden Fleece,' and from Sologub's 'Kapli Krovi,' will you read them?"

She smiled down at his drawn, eager face.

"With great pleasure, Alexander Grigorovitch! Now, where is a glass that I may put my hat on straight?"

To her amazement his expression changed with horrifying rapidity to one of malignant anger.

"A glass? A glass?" he shrieked. "So—you have only been laughing at me—because—because my legs aren't as long as other men's."

Then his mouth quivered and he hid his white face in his hands.

Maria touched his shoulder lightly. "This is utter nonsense, Alexander Grigorovitch," she said, "and very unkind of you. If I were you, I should have a glass so that when ladies come to tea they can see to put on their hats. And, if I had a fine head like yours, I should look at it very often indeed."

He looked up shamed and sorry.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "It is because I am —not normal. I have a very bad temper—and now I have been rude to *you!*"

She soothed him kindly, and left him finally consoled by an invitation to come to tea one day soon in St. Anne's Terrace.

The sun had come out, and she had the chauffeur put down the hood and she sat enjoying the clear, fresh air.

The trees were green and sparkling after their vigorous bath, and the sky was of a soft blue with no hint of the hot metallic look that of late had made it unbearable.

Poor Tomsk! Maria was extremely sorry for him. Undoubtedly the poor little man was, as he himself had said, "abnormal."

In the moment of unreasonable anger that she had witnessed she had remembered the episode of the wretched actress at Glanvil Mansions.

Now, she reflected, he could not have carried the woman downstairs, even slung over the handrail.

He had grown perceptibly weaker since she had last seen him.

CHAPTER IX

LURTY DRELLO opened the garden door of his father's house with a key and went in, shutting the gate quietly.

Everything was very still, under the harvest moon which hung low, as if heavy with its gold, in the sky.

It was three o'clock in the morning and chilly. The young man turned up his coat collar and walked quietly across the grass.

He had no house key and wished to waken his sister without disturbing his father.

Her window was half open, but the chintz curtains were drawn.

He picked up some small stones from the path and began trying to hit the glass; twice he succeeded, but no movement in the room answered the slight noise.

Then he took a large stone and finally managed to throw it into the room past the curtains.

He waited a moment and then called softly, "*Maria!*"

After a moment a candle was lighted and Maria appeared between the curtains.

"Lurty, is that you?"

"Yes. Come down, will you?"

She peered anxiously at him. "The baby?"

"No, he's all right. But come on down and let me ı," he answered impatiently.

A few minutes later she opened the door, and they ent silently into the dark drawing-room.

"I'll light the gas," she said.

"No, no. The candlelight will do. Sit down."

She obeyed.

"Maria, it's Doris," he blurted out roughly, "she's ırrying on with that Becker fellow."

"Oh, Lurty!"

"Yes. I—I've only just found out. I—It has up- t me."

His commonplace young face was for the moment ınobled by the dignity of sincere sorrow.

Maria sat staring up at him, her hands clasped, ır black plaits hanging forward over her shoulders. ıguely she realized that she was not surprised; she ıd, somehow, always expected something of the kind. hen, with a stab of remorse, she remembered that she ıd even suspected Becker himself, when she met them ıat day in the Embankment Gardens. She should ıve warned her brother.

"Tell me, Lurty, dear."

Lurty swallowed hard. "Well, she's always had a t of men about her, but I suppose I thought there ıs safety in numbers, and this chap Becker, he's a ıt, you know—lots of money, a car, boxes instead stalls—all that kind of thing."

"I know."

"And I never noticed. Neither did Mother Leate, even father, and he, God knows, never *liked* her.

She's as clever as paint, you know," he added, in a spurt of dreary enthusiasm. "Used to laugh at him and call him Beau Brummell."

"Yes, I know. I've heard her."

"And then, to-night, she went to some dance, and I was at home writing—my new novel, you know. As a rule, I go to bed about twelve—she has her key—but I got interested in my work, and sat on in my study, writing. She came home with Becker; the light was on in the hall, as I always leave it for her at night, so they didn't notice my light under the door, and they stood whispering together, and—I heard what they said."

He paused and wiped his face nervously on a crumpled handkerchief.

"He kissed her, and I heard her laugh and tell him to be careful that the—the Genius didn't come downstairs and catch him. The Genius," he added with bitterness, "that's me! Look here, Maria, don't you think some of my stuff is pretty good?"

He raised his voice in sudden anger as he put the question.

"Of course I do, Lurty. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be accepted, would it?"

Lurty was a vain man, but even he perceived the hollowness of this consolation.

"I don't know about that, but—they were laughing at me, poking fun at 'Lillian's Love Story'—and," he added, irresistibly pushed to the phrase by the quality of his literary mind, "under my own roof, too!"

"Oh, well, Lurty," Maria said, "perhaps it all

seemed worse to you than it really is. Perhaps it's only just—flirting."

He shook his head. "I heard," he said slowly, the slight animation engendered by his anger dying away. "I heard her promise to go to—to his flat to-morrow."

Maria blushed vividly. "Lurty, do you think it is the first time," she asked.

"No. He said he'd have pink roses in *her* vase—again."

"Oh."

There was a pause. Behind the security of the high garden walls, the Drellos always left the drawing-room curtains undrawn in the summer nights, so that the now paling moonlight lay in two rectangular patches on the floor.

At the other side of the room the candle burned red, a little island of light in the half darkness. Maria's face, full of commiseration, was pale as she leaned forward toward her brother.

He, disheveled and tired, looked younger than he was; like an unattractive and helpless boy.

"What did you do?" she whispered.

"I—I waited for a while."

"Till he went?"

He nodded, eyeing her with a queer furtive look.

"I see. You didn't want a row before her?"

"That's it."

"And when he'd gone?" she persisted.

The clock struck as she spoke, and he waited as if he must not speak until its vibration had entirely died away.

"I came out of my study and followed her upstairs. She was undressing—in the dark! I—I told her I knew, and——" his voice broke, and he put up one hand to still the quiver of his lips. The hand, she noticed, was not quite clean.

"Lurty, what did she say?"

"She said I could do whatever I liked. That she—loves him."

"Oh," cried Maria in disgust, "how can she, that mean little thin man!"

"I don't see what his being thin has to do with it."

She could not explain to him the involuntary contempt felt by many physically fine women for the man of puny build.

"I thought him horrid," she declared instead. "Do you mean that she wants to marry him?"

"Yes."

"Well, will you—divorce her?"

Lurty shook his head. "No I won't. Why should I?"

Maria rose and paced slowly about the room.

"I don't know—I don't think anything ought to be done in a hurry."

"But she—she has gone," her brother blurted out. "That's why I'm here!"

"Gone? Where to?"

"To—to him, Becker! She just put on her fur cloak and marched out of the house."

"Oh, Lurty!"

"Yes. That's why I came here."

"You ought to have followed her. To have followed her and brought her back by force, if necessary. Do you mean to say you just let your wife go off to—to that—without trying to stop her?"

Maria, scarlet with indignation, faced her brother, holding the candle above his head, the better to see him, and Lurty suddenly felt like an entomological specimen under a microscope.

"Where does he live?" she pursued.

"In Knightsbridge—in Wellesley Mansions."

She paused for a moment and set down the candle. "Look here, Lurty," she said finally, "you must go there at once and fetch her. She must come. Tell her you'll arrange a divorce later, but she must come back to-night."

Lurty frowned heavily. "Well," he answered, "you can just put all that out of your mind once and for all. I won't do it."

"You won't go and fetch her?"

"No; I won't."

"But why, Lurty?"

"Because I don't choose to. That's why I came here. I want you to go."

"Lurty, that's impossible," she cried, aghast. "Surely, you must see that? In the first place, she wouldn't come for me, and, besides that, I couldn't go —to a strange man's house."

"You could. They'd know I sent you. And I tell you, Maria, you're the only person on earth Doris is afraid of."

"Afraid of me? Nonsense."

"It may be nonsense, but it's true—come on, get into some clothes, and I'll drive you there."

"I can't, Lurty."

"You can."

"But it is *you* who ought to go."

Argument, she knew, was useless when he was in a certain mood.

As a child his rare fits of obstinacy had proved invincible by her mother or father, and this was one of those fits of obstinacy.

She knew that he loved his wife, but she saw that he would not go to his rival's house. Was it cowardice? Was it vanity? She could not decide.

"Lurty, shall I wake father?"

"Look here, Maria," he said slowly, "do you remember that time when Prince Fritz was made King of Sarmania?"

"Don't, Lurty!"

"Listen. You remember how for several days he neither came near you nor wrote?"

"Yes," she answered harshly, "I remember."

"Well, look here. Do you know why he sent that note, and—came to say good-bye to you?"

"Why?" she faltered, in bewilderment.

"Yes. Well, I'll tell you. He came because I went to his rooms and put the fear of God into him. I told him," Lurty ended, with some pomposity, "that he—must."

She stood grasping a chair back, the color ebbing from her face as though some one had opened one of her veins.

For nearly three years she had cherished this one memory, that, however ambitious, however indifferent to his love, her lover had been, he had at least cared enough to steal from his new, stirring duties the time to come to see her once more.

And it had been Lurty who had made him come. Lurty, whom she had not despised only because he was her brother!

"I see," she said slowly. "You mean that—one good turn deserves another."

"Yes. I—did my best for you that time, Maria."

"Well, I'll do my best for you—I'll go and dress."

CHAPTER X

DESPITE her fears, Maria had little difficulty in persuading her sister-in-law to go home with her. It was simplifying, though not romantic, to find that her ally in this plan was Mr. Becker himself.

"Quite right, Miss Drello," the young man declared, when, after much ringing at his flat, she had been admitted by him, for fear of the neighbors complaining of the bell at such an hour.

"It will be far wiser for—for Mrs. Drello to return home with you—I suppose you have a taxi?"

Doris was very hysterical and reproached her Chummy with heartlessness.

"No, no, darling, I am not heartless," he protested. "I—I am sensible, that's all."

"You didn't think about being sensible when you first persuaded me to come here," she wailed, and he scratched his head in perplexity.

It was a very paltry and unbeautiful scene.

The young man had evidently been in bed when his first caller had arrived, for under his violet silk dressing-gown appeared glimpses of white silk pajamas, and his feet, thrust into purple leather slippers, were otherwise bare.

"I will never go back to Lurty," wailed Doris, who sat huddled in a brocaded evening cloak on the divan.

"Of course you will, don't be nonsensical, Doris. He won't be unkind to you. Come, say good-bye to—Mr. Becker, and we will go——"

Maria, who had not sat down, looked very tall and very dignified in her plain day clothes.

Becker eyed her appreciatively. "It's good of you to come," he said. "She will be grateful after a bit."

"I don't want her to be grateful," Maria retorted, dryly, "I want her to be *quick*. It will be broad day in a few minutes. Come, Doris."

Maria hated her sister-in-law; she hated the puny dandy in his brocade dressing-gown; perhaps most of all she hated the room and the memories she knew it to hold for the two.

"Doris!"

Doris rose, blew her nose, which was red, and shone, and drew her cloak together.

"Chummy," she whispered, going to him, holding out her arms.

But the poor creature was doomed to disappointment.

Chummy Becker was not capable of much love, but, such as it was, he had given none of it to her. He had given her a certain admiration for her pretty face; a certain gratitude for the gratification of his instinct for scalp-hunting; a certain pleasure in her amusing, artificial little ways; a certain satisfaction in being adored by her; and a certain very small proportion of unenthusiastic passion.

These accumulated sentiments do not make even an inferior kind of love.

And when she came to his rooms that night he had been bothered and a little bored, for he had never had the slightest wish to marry her.

Therefore he regarded this tall, handsome sister-in-law of hers not at all as an enemy.

"Good-bye, darling," he said, kissing Doris, to whom the encroaching daylight was not merciful, "don't be afraid; he won't do anything——"

"You—you'll write?" she urged, her arms, to Maria's immense discomfort, round his neck.

"Yes, yes, I'll write. And you to me. Yes, of course, darling. Now you mustn't keep Miss Drello waiting any longer——"

In the taxi Doris wept unrestrainedly, and Maria was deeply sorry for the little trifling sinner. She could not know that seven-eighths of Doris' grief was due to her anger at having Becker's embarrassed indifference revealed to Maria. Doris was nearly as incapable of love as was her lover, but she had read many novels, and thought much about the perilous joys of rendezvous, surreptitious correspondence, and other thrilling delights.

Lurty bored her and she wished to be the center of a great love affair.

Chummy Becker had profited by her state of mind, and that explains the whole story.

Even now she would have kept up a pretence, but Maria, while perfectly kind, took a prosaic view of the situation, and expressed it freely.

"Poor Lurty is very unhappy, Doris," she said; "*he* loves you."

"So does Chummy!"

"No, dear, he doesn't. Surely you could see that? You must just face it. The sooner you do, the sooner you'll—be cured, yourself."

It was easy for Maria Drello to acknowledge a man's faithlessness, but it was inherently difficult for her to believe that a woman could be either evil enough, or careless enough, to give herself to a man she did not love.

She therefore believed that Doris, absurd though it seemed, must, in her way, love Becker.

She let down both the windows of the taxi, and breathed the fresh early air with relief.

"Lurty ought to have come himself," Doris snapped crossly.

Maria said nothing.

"Lurty is a coward," his wife went on.

"Don't, Doris. He is my brother, and your husband, and—your son's father. And he has been dreadfully unhappy. Believe me, dear," she added, in a gentle voice, "he loves you."

Doris bridled. "Well, I should think he did," she agreed with emphasis.

Maria was again silent. She felt that her slow brain was useless in the matter of analyzing characters; Doris puzzled her utterly.

And her own mind, now that the immediate excitement was over, was busy in the past.

Would Fritz have come if Lurty hadn't made him?

Could poor Lurty possibly have "made" Fritz do anything? Had Fritz hated coming?

Had Fritz's love, after all, been a poor thing, like that of Chummy Becker?

And now? Did Fritz remember her, or had he utterly forgotten her?

Over and over in her weary brain turned the wheel of questions.

She wondered, Oh, *how* she wondered, if, after nearly three years' unbroken silence, Fritz could still love her?

She certainly still loved him, but—that was different. She did not attempt to tell herself in what way it was different, but she belonged to the vanishing order of women who are born to believe in the old law of nature that men and women are different, and cannot be weighed in the same scales.

They had reached the building in which poor Lurty's precarious nest was built, and Doris clutched her sister-in-law's hand. "Maria—you must come in with me——"

"Nonsense, Doris, I shall do nothing of the sort. You needn't be at all afraid, he will be kind——"

"But I am afraid!"

Maria regarded her with calm, kind eyes. "You must not be."

Doris got out of the taxi and tried to draw Maria after her.

"No, my dear; I am not coming."

Doris, on whose face the tear stained remains of her last night's make-up were very visible in the strengthening daylight, dropped her hand.

"It is," she said, with immense dignity, "a very serious thing to commit adultery!"

Poor Maria burst out laughing, there was in the words so little shame, so much vanity.

"Doris, how can you!" she cried.

Doris scowled. "Suppose," she suggested, "Lurty shot me?"

Then, to her own surprise possibly, a real sensation of fear came over her, and she shivered. "He—might, you know," she stammered.

Maria's amusement vanished.

"Doris, listen to me. Lurty is going to forgive you, *because he loves you.* Be kind to him, for you have hurt him dreadfully. And—Oh, my dear," she added, speaking more to herself than to the tawdry breaker of commandments at the taxi door, "it is a fine thing to have someone love you——"

Doris stared at her, and a look of pity touched her insignificant face.

"I know, Maria," she said, with the awkwardness common to affected people in their rare moments of absolute naturalness, "I remember about—Prince Fritz. But Hubert Ballington cares for you—why don't you marry him?"

Maria shook her head.

"Good-bye, dear," she said kindly. "Give my love to Lurty—and the baby."

She watched the little creature disappear up the stairway, and then, stirred by a sudden desire for physical movement, paid the chauffeur and started home on foot.

It was a beautiful morning with a promise of comparative coolness in the air, and she walked rapidly to the Embankment, where she found the river rosy in the rising sun.

The streets were very empty, and the town wore the unusual aspect of a well-known place seen under remarkable circumstances.

Maria paused near a coffee stall. She was hungry, but she was half afraid to approach the heavy-eyed man who stood stretching his shirt-sleeved arms at the door of his strange little place of business.

"Cawfy, miss?"

He had a pleasant face, the man, and he was quite alone.

"I—I should like some," she said, thrilling to the spirit of adventure.

The man went back into the stall and prepared the coffee.

"Don't often 'ave a real lady for a customer," he remarked, giving her the thick, chipped cup. "Plenty of the *other* kind, you know——"

She nodded, and gave him sixpence.

"Somebody ill, miss?" he went on, in a way so harmless and friendly that she answered as simply: "No—I have been with some friends who are in trouble."

"I sometimes think," he returned, "that to ladies and gentlemen a friend in bad trouble is a onusual kind of thing. With us poor folks it's the other way abaht, mostly. A friend as *isn't* in trouble of some kind is the onusual thing with us!"

"I don't know; except that—my friends are never hungry, and yours, I fear, are—I should say their troubles are very much alike."

The coffee-man laughed indulgently.

"No, no, miss. 'Ow many 'o your friends have got their 'usbands or sons in quod, or their girls—I beg pardon, miss," he broke off with an effort. "Wot I mean to say is, diseases comes to us all, rich and poor alike, and death. I myself, I was disappointed in love, I was, the same as any dook. Them things, of course, is the same in any clawss. But quod—seeing your own daughters where they 'adn't no call to be—knowing a man get three months for stealing a bit of meat for 'is missus when she's ill and fancies it—those kind of troubles we've got, *as well as the kind you git.*"

Maria set down her cup, empty of its curious fluid.

"I dare say you are right," she said, looking at him. "I never thought of that before. Well—good morning."

"Morning, miss——"

He burst out whistling as soon as he had no one to talk to. She heard him as she walked away, and the thrush-like quality of his whistle reminded her of the dyer in the street of the Lyre.

She wondered if she would ever go back to Paris. For weeks her mind seemed to have stopped, as far as the future was concerned. She had been living on from day to day, making no plans of any kind.

Her father seemed to be taking it for granted that

she had come home to stay, but he asked no questions and she had given no explanations.

The great heat was by everyone held responsible for laziness mental as well as physical.

But now the great heat was practically over, and Maria felt stirring within her a vague unrest, and she knew that she would soon be driven by it to some definite decision.

She walked on the Embankment until about eight, and then went home.

The postman, an old man she had known for years, was just ringing at the garden door as she got there.

"Morning, miss—two letters for you this morning——"

"Thanks, Mr. Jones——"

She went slowly into the garden and sat down on a bench.

One of the leters was from Ferarri.

> "Dear Miss Drello," it said, "I have a commission to paint Lady Ivyhurst, and shall arrive in London on Wednesday. Of course I shall come and see you. I shan't talk about my feelings, for I have come to work and must keep calm. So you needn't worry about that. I have not missed you at all, but I shall be glad to see you again.—Vincent Ferrari."

Maria Drello sat in the garden for a long time, thinking.

CHAPTER XI

ONE evening in September a taxi drew up at the shabby garden door in St. Anne's Terrace, and from it descended a gentleman in evening ess and a curious long cloak like a stage conspira-r's. With immaculately gloved hands he settled his tle account with the chauffeur, and rang the bell. This gentleman was Tomsk.

His cloak hanging from his shoulders to the ground course hid his legs; therefore he believed his physi-l peculiarities to be invisible. He was in his best od that evening, for he was going to play for the st time for Maria.

Hitherto she had only heard him accompany songs, t, in asking him to accompany her in some songs to-ght, she had added that his consenting to play some ssian solo music as well would give her very great easure. So Tomsk was very happy.

When the garden door opened he gathered up his ak and skipped up the path with surprising agility. Thimblebee had been warned by her mistress about r. Tomsk's deformity, but Tomsk had unfortunately t been warned about hers, so when the old woman him into the beautiful old paneled hall, it was with face of rage that the dwarf looked up at her.

"What's the matter with your eye?" he growled.

"If it comes to that," she retorted, deeply hurt, "what's the matter with your legs?"

Tomsk took off his cloak and uttered a long, low roar.

He loathed any physical defects in other people; hunchbacked people drove him to a frenzy; people with only one arm or one leg roused him to an almost murderous rage. It was on occasions such as this that his mental shortcomings became startlingly apparent. And for years no one had dared to mention his deformity to him.

"*What did you say?*" he gibbered.

The old woman, her empty eye socket all aquiver, drew back in terror.

At that moment the drawing-room door opened and Vincenzo Ferrari came sauntering out, his hands in his pockets.

"Hullo," he drawled, "what's the trouble?"

Thimblebee fled in disorder, and Tomsk pulled himself together.

"That woman," he said, his lips quivering under his scanty mustache, "is a fool; an idiot; *une sacrée guenon!*"

Ferrari burst out laughing. "Well done," he cried, and added, turning to the open door, "Miss Drello, here is Mr. Tomsk calling poor old Thimblebee a cursed she-monkey!"

"How do you know I am Tomsk?" the dwarf asked suspiciously.

"How! Because Miss Drello told me you had a head I'd like to paint—and you have!"

Maria cast a grateful look at the painter and shook hands with Tomsk.

"Do come in, both of you," she said, "to the drawing-room. My father will be delighted to see Mr. Tomsk again."

Old Drello, looking more diaphanous than ever, after the long-continued hot weather, welcomed his singular guest cordially. He and Tomsk got on very well together. This was their third time of meeting, and W. D.'s grand manner delighted the dwarf. In a few minutes Tomsk was quite happy again, and had forgiven Thimblebee for the crime of possessing but one eye.

Presently Lurty and Doris arrived.

Lurty looked very happy, for Doris was making the most of her rôle of the erring wife forgiven, and played the part with some skill.

She was subdued, gentle, and a little shy, variegating and accentuating her interpretation by little bouts of demonstrative tenderness.

She looked very pretty in a pale gray frock, made, she said, at home, by "a little woman who came in by the day."

Maria watched her with benevolence, seeing no further than the little sly thing meant her to see.

The other guests were Fred Crossfield, now almost quite bald, and very wordy and pompous, his wife, a moneyed woman of the white rabbit type, and a Captain and Mrs. Blake-Barnes, friends of the young Drellos.

Captain Blake-Barnes was a good musician, and he and Maria were to sing together.

To Ferrari the simple festivity held great charm; the softly lighted room, the open windows through which he could see the cedar branches against the sky; Maria as a member of a family, instead of an artistic solitary as she was in Paris; Drello's splendid white head; even poor Tomsk—all these things combined to create for the sensitive Italian an atmosphere delicate as gossamer, full of mystery and poetry.

He sat near the door, facing the room, his brown-lidded eyes half closed, studying the picture before him.

Captain Blake-Barnes sang a dull song of Brahms'.

Then he sang an exquisitely beautiful song of Brahms'.

Tomsk, seen in profile, his deficient legs hidden by an intervening chair, was an interesting study; Ferrari made up his mind to sketch, or even paint, the little man.

In the gaslight Mrs. Blake-Barnes's red hair made a spot of vivid color.

Maria, dressed in dark blue, sat, very quiet, in the shell-shaped wool-work chair.

Ferrari watched her as the commonplace, bald-headed little Captain's soft true voice went on telling in a lovely strain the story of some peasant girl's love and death.

Vincenzo Ferrari was very happy, and his strong, animal, dark face softened as he listened and watched. It was not one of the hours when he most loved Maria Drello; it was, rather, one of his hours of keenest appreciation of romance and what he called, for want of a better name, atmosphere. Here, in this quiet old

house, among these quiet, dull people, a new side of his own sentimental character was pleasantly revealing itself to him, and he was thoroughly enjoying the revelation.

When the song was over Tomsk played.

He played of Schumann, of Chopin. Chopin was Tomsk's musical *âme damnée;* the romantic, idealistic half of the poor little man's nature reached its fullest expression in his interpretation of the Polish composer's music.

When he played, as he called it, *du Chopin,* he was beautiful.

The applause was spontaneous and prolonged, Tomsk beamed.

"I shall play again?" he asked Maria.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Tomsk—please do."

He looked at her for an appreciable length of time, his deep-set eyes glowing with happiness.

"Will you have—yes, I know!"

With a little chuckle he began to play, and, when he had played a few bars, old William Drello burst out laughing. "That's very funny," he said. Mrs. Blake-Barnes frowned reprovingly. "It is *beautiful,*" she corrected, but the old man laughed again, and this time Ferrari joined him.

Tomsk was enchanted, as he pursued his course to the end of the delightful, rib-tickling thing.

"What is it?"

Maria asked the question as the absurd travesty came to its pompous end.

"Minstrels," declared Tomsk.

Ferrari rose. "'Minstrels'? It is a street band playing at the edge of the evening," he corrected, "the trombone is out of tune; the men's faces are red and shiny—musical people hate them, and write about them to the *Times*"—he added suddenly, his stony brown eyes flashing, "I have it—it is of Debussy!"

Tomsk, enthroned on the piano stool, which was of the old-fashioned kind that turn on a huge invisible screw, clapped his hands delightedly.

"Right, Monsieur Ferrari! The magic man of music wrote—no—*told* that. And now," he added suddenly very grave, "listen to this." It is impossible to describe music, but the Debussy lover, in his attempts to relate his master, has one great advantage: Debussy's music does tell fairy stories.

And Tomsk now played the story of the cathedral under the sea.

If an engulfed cathedral could exist; if bells buried many fathoms deep under the sea could still ring; if sea-buried priests could still read the Mass; if simple peasant souls could still, under the water, kneel and pray; if all these beautiful dream things could be, then Debussy's poem expresses them.

In Brittany the legend is devoutly believed, and the city of Ys is a real city to many thousands of souls. And the fat, bearded Frenchman has heard the legend with his soul and translated it into music, and the bells he makes them ring, and the priests he makes them chant, and the waves, he makes them break the edges of harmonies as they break the edges of material deflections any day when a little wind stirs water.

Very quietly Maria Drello rose as Tomsk played and went through one of the windows to the garden. She was thinking of the scene Tomsk had described to her; the scene in the Cathedral of Ipniz, the day of the Coronation.

She went slowly across the lawn, and leaned against the ample trunk of the cedar tree.

The bells whose tintinnabulation Tomsk was so amazingly producing, were to her the bells ringing high up in an ancient brown tower she had never seen. . . .

The crown, Tomsk had told her, was a narrow gold circlet, a relic from very old ages. The cloak she knew was lined with ermine—and, standing under the tree with closed eyes, Maria Drello could see the rather prominent blue eyes of her old lover; she could see his face as plainly as if he stood before her.

And she suffered, as do suffer these remarkable and unusual women who can love on in the absence of the beloved.

She heard her lover's voice, a little thick for all its youth; she saw his beautiful hands. . . .

"Maria!"

It was Ferrari who had joined her, unseen until he spoke.

She looked at him in silence.

"My beautiful—I love you. Marry me!"

In her lonely misery she looked at him. Vaguely, in her unanalytical way, she knew that he would help her to forget. And not forgetting was a very dreadful pain.

No doubt Fritz had forgotten her long ago; why should she not forget him?

"My dear," Ferrari went on, his teeth glittering in a way Latin teeth seem, of all teeth, to know the secret of, "marry me, and forget—Prince Fritz."

She started. "Who—told you?" she faltered.

"Lady Ivyhurst."

Tomsk was now playing a waltz—a curious dissonant thing full of uneasy charm.

And in the stillness Vincenzo Ferrari took Maria Drello in his arms and kissed her.

"My beautiful dear," he said, "I—I love you——"

His heart was beating violently; she could feel it. And hers kept time to it.

"I—don't love you," she faltered.

"No. But—you will. And I will cure you," he burst out in French, "of remembering *him*. Why should you waste years thinking of a man who is going to marry another woman?"

The waltz (it was one of Ravel's, and Maria never forgot its queer, haunting melody) went on, and there was a long pause.

"Is—he?" she asked presently.

"Yes. It's in this evening's papers. A German princess—Princess Irmengarde, or Ermentrude of Something or other."

A fierce wave of jealousy swept over her. It was an unbearable thought that Fritz should marry. Somehow it had never occurred to her that he could.

"When is it to be?"

"At the end of the month, I believe. Royalties never have long engagements——"

There came from the house a sound of applause, and Lurty Drello appeared in the window, his bulky figure disadvantageously outlined against the light.

"Maria," he called, "where are you? We want you to sing——"

Maria turned to Ferrari.

"Listen," she said in French, very low, "I don't love you, but—I will marry you——"

Then she went into the house.

CHAPTER XII

THE next day the papers were full of the news of the engagement of the King of Sarmania to Princess Ermengarde of Sulm-Kammerfels.

The *Mirror* presented a full page of rather blurred but extremely interesting photographs of His Majesty, her future Majesty, and their several homes.

Maria Drello would not have seen the papers but for her brother.

It was her custom to go nearly every day to Lurty's flat, partly to try to help Doris, whom, with some absurdity, she believed to be thoroughly repentant, but chiefly because a deep love for her small nephew had burst out in her heart, as a spring of clear water sometimes bursts, unlooked for, out of the earth.

The baby, Little Billee, knew his aunt, and crowed at her with all his eloquence; he gave her moist kisses, and clutched her finger, in the beguiling, unfair way that babies use toward their elders. So, that Thursday morning in mid-September, Miss Drello made her way to her nephew's place of residence.

The lift man, a sociable soul, admired the tall, beautiful sister of the gentleman in thirty-four.

"Fine day, miss."

"Yes—a beautiful day——"

"Mr. Drello 'asn't gone out yet," Mr. Bunce volunteered.

She was surprised. "Hasn't he?"

"No, miss. I *think*," the lift man continued with the confidential air one family person naturally assumes in referring to another, "that the baby's getting another tooth."

"Dear me," observed Maria.

"Yes, miss. Teeth, I always say, are a pest from the very start. First we get 'em, then we lose 'em——"

The lift stopped with a jerk.

Maria liked the lift man, who was, indeed, a nice creature.

"Yes," she returned kindly, "teeth *are* a nuisance."

She found Lurty reading the *Times*.

"Hullo, Lurty."

"Hullo, dear—the kid's still in the nursery——"

"And Doris——?"

Lurty beamed fatuously. "Good old Maria! I can't tell you how happy I am, dear. And I shall never forget how good you were—that night."

"Morning," suggested Maria mildly.

"All right, then, *morning*. You see, dear, it was all my fault," he went on. "I was too damned busy with my book. And she was lonely. It never does," went on this exponent of human nature, "to leave a woman too much alone."

"I suppose not," assented Maria.

Lurty beamed. "No, dear. It *doesn't*. Well—I am sorry for Doris now," he went on. "She imagines things to have been much worse than they were——"

"Does she?"

Brothers often seem wonderfully simple to sisters; nearly as simple as sisters appear to brothers.

It is these little things that make life so diverting.

Lurty was polishing his nails as he spoke. He wore a purple flannel dressing-gown with silk facings.

"Oh, yes—she's *dreadfully* sorry. But, I say, Maria," the young man went on, with a sudden lift of his dull gray eyes, "I *do* hope you aren't cut up about —about this marriage?"

Maria regarded him serenely. "Oh, dear me, no, Lurty," she said with blandness.

"I'm glad of that, dear old thing——"

There was a pause. She wished Lurty was not growing so fat. She wished his skin were clearer; in a strong light one observed in him a tendency to spots.

He laid down the nailpolisher and looked up at her. "Not a bad-looking girl," he observed, "*for* a German——"

"Is she?"

Lurty did not look at her. "The pictures aren't bad," he said casually, "in what your Frenchman calls *Le Miroir* and *L'Esquisse*——"

Then he left the room whistling and Maria was alone.

Alone but for the *Sketch* and the *Mirror* which lay in amiable contiguity on the table. After a pause, during which she sat motionless, she rose and looked at them.

One picture showed the king proudly surveying a

wild boar just slain by his royal hand; another portrayed him on the Terrace at Monte Carlo; where, it seemed, he had, as a rule, prodigious luck.

There was one picture of the Square, the *place*, as Tomsk called it, at Ipniz.

He wore this time a very attractive, tight-fitting uniform, and stood in the middle of an otherwise dull group.

The other paper, however, scored in turn by an interior of the palace.

In this picture His Majesty sat at a writing table, obviously weighed down by the cares of state.

He was a little fatter than he had been, Maria thought, and possibly his hair had thinned a little at the temples.

His was a country so unimportant, so definitely second or even third rate—but he wore beautiful wrinkly boots——

Then Maria looked at the pictures of H. H. Princess Ermengarde of Sulm-Kammerfels.

A stiff, unpliable girl she looked, the Princess, with a head close-curled like a poodle's, and a long, desolate-looking chin.

She was, Maria read, twenty-six years old, and a famous horsewoman. Maria herself had never in her life sat on a horse!

The Kaiser was said to be greatly pleased by the match, and the Emperor of Russia, who was, incidentally, Her Highness's godfather, was to be represented at the wedding, owing to his unavoidable presence elsewhere, by one of the Grand Dukes——

And here was Lurty, bearing Little Billee, who was chewing a bit of arrowroot, and very well pleased with the world.

"Looks stronger, doesn't he?" Lurty asked.

"I think he looks beautiful, Lurty, dear."

Little Billee was not beautiful; he never had been, he never was to be beautiful, but family feeling is a fine thing, and it did its duty now.

Maria took the child from his father and kissed him.

"He *is* a duck," she exclaimed warmly.

"Isn't he? I say, Maria—I like your Frenchman."

"He's Italian, as it happens——"

"All right, Italian. I don't care what he is. I like him."

Maria looked at him over the baby's unfledged and pinkish head. "I'm glad, Lurty——"

Lurty put on his gloves, for he was overdue at the office.

"I say, old girl," he blurted out, nervously, "you're so fond of babies——"

"Yes?"

He quailed before her level gaze, then he went on with the headlong heroism of the born coward: "Why don't you marry him?"

"Dear old Lurty—well, here's a secret. Perhaps I shall."

"Perhaps?"

"Yes. I am—not quite sure. Do you see?"

"But—he's asked you?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, he's *asked* me several times. I have never quite dared before, but—I—I think," she added, with a white face, but intense deliberation, "that I will."

She was glad, as she walked homeward, that she had told poor old Lurty. It had been delightful to behold his delight!

She would marry Ferrari; she would, in a way, be happy. At the very best she could make him happy, and that was something.

Fritz was to be married; Fritz had forgotten her.

She stood still pretending to examine some Indian silver in a shop window. Oh, yes, Fritz had, of course, forgotten her.

The man inside the shop, the man with a thing like a napkin ring screwed into his eye to help him in his intimate researches in the insides of a watch, saw Maria's face as she flushed at the thought that, perhaps, after all, Fritz had *not* forgotten her.

Whether he had or not, the watchmaker never forgot that blush.

"Of course he has," she told herself angrily. "If he hadn't, he couldn't marry that woman with hair like a wig."

She reached home at about noon. It was a cold day, and toward the last of her walk a driving wind swept the streets; autumn was close at hand.

And she, Maria, was going to marry Vincenzo Ferrari. Dully she opened the garden door and went into the garden.

Suppose, she thought, she were to find a letter from

Fritz? A letter telling her that the exigencies of his position had forced him to decide to marry—suppose she were to find a package containing only a little ring; or a little bouquet of faded flowers—she was full of the possibility of romance as she opened the house door.

But there was no letter, no package.

And thus the days passed.

Maria saw little of Ferrari; for he was very busy with his portrait of Lady Ivyhurst.

He wrote to her nearly every day, however, and she read and reread his letters.

He gave her a ring, a thin gold hoop of small, white, old diamonds. It had belonged to his mother, he said.

William Drello was greatly pleased by the news of his daughter's engagement; he knew, though he told nobody, that he was failing rapidly, and had only a short time to live. He did not wish to die; but death was made easier for him in that his daughter would not be left alone.

Ferrari was a delightful fiancé; something sinister in him, that Maria had hitherto feared, seemed to have gone from him. He was a gentle, staid, respectable lover, and she liked him more than ever before.

Then came the test. She was sitting sewing in the drawing-room one evening when Thimblebee brought in the post. There was one for her.

"Dear Maria," the letter read, "You will have heard of my engagement. Last night I dreamed of you, and knew that I must explain to you. Beloved, you have

been—you are—the only woman I love. I love you to-night as much—possibly more—than ever. But it is necessary that I marry. Will you send me one word to wish me, not happiness, but success in my marriage? God bless you—FRITZ. Oh, my dear love!"

* * * * * * *

An hour later—it was a dark evening, full of rain, Tomsk was told that a lady wished to see him.

"Look, Tomsk," she said, "he has written to me. And I—Oh, Alexander Grigorovitch, you must help me. Will you?"

Tomsk's thin face paled. "In any way, at any cost," he said slowly, "I will help you, Maria Drello."

CHAPTER XIII

"I HAVE," she began, wasting no time, "promised to marry Mr. Ferrari, and—I can't do it."

"I see."

"I have had a letter from—from the King of Sarmania, and—I thought he had forgotten, but he hasn't, Mr. Tomsk," she blurted out with a blush. "He—still cares——"

"Call me Alexander Grigorovitch," returned the dwarf, inexorably.

"Yes—Alexander Grigorovitch."

He looked at her. Her coming to him in her need was to him almost like a miracle; it was a glorious, golden thing to his starved soul.

Then, suddenly, his face darkened. "Why did you come to me?" he asked. "It is not usual for a lady to tell these things to—a man."

She missed his meaning, his bitter dread lest it was his difference from other men that rendered such coming possible to her.

She was too engrossed in her own misery to notice his, but, luckily, her answer was the only one that could possibly have soothed his sick vanity.

"I have so few friends——" she murmured in an absent way.

His face cleared. "Yes, Miss Drello, you were right. Alexander Grigorovitch *is* your friend. And now, please go on. Tell me all about it. The more you tell, the better I shall be able to help you."

Maria told him the whole story, from the time when she had first known Ferrari in Paris; how he had diverted her even though she did not quite like him; how she had deliberately amused herself with him.

Tomsk, enthroned in the largest chair, obviously felt every inch a judge.

"You—coquetted with him?" There was severity in his voice.

"Yes—that is, I tried to. I didn't really know how to flirt, Mr. Tomsk—Alexander Grigorovitch. But, you see, there were days when I would have done nearly anything in order to forget Fritz. Why I am so stupid, I don't know. Other girls get over things——" She sat staring past him, one hand laid over her heart in an unconscious gesture that was very beautiful. "Only I seem unable to forget——"

"That is because you have the gift for loving. Very few people have it."

"Perhaps. It is misery, though——"

"It is glory," he returned quietly.

There was a pause, during which was heard the voice of a parrot of great age and vitality who lived in the basement.

It did not talk, it shrieked with a shriek of madness and hatred.

Maria shuddered. "What an awful bird! Well—the night you were with us, he told me of Fritz's en-

gagement. Somehow I had never even feared that he *might* marry. It never occurred to me. And, when I heard it I was so—angry; yes, I was so angry and jealous—that I promised Mr. Ferrari to marry him. Everyone was glad, for he is very nice—and it comforted me to feel——" She broke off and hid her face for a moment with her hands.

"I—I felt as if he must know—Fritz, I mean; that he would know I was engaged as well as he—and that, therefore, he couldn't think I cared any longer——" All her life she had been shy and reserved; even to Barbara Gryce she had never been able to talk about her own deep feelings, and now she was baring her very soul to this Russian dwarf!

As she talked she realized the strangeness of this; but she felt no shyness.

It was an intense relief for her to pour out her feelings.

"Then to-day," she ended, "an hour ago, I had a letter from him. He loves me still. He has to marry because he is a king; but it is me he loves.

"And what am I to do?"

Tomsk looked at her. "You must tell Ferrari."

She shook her head. "I shall, of course, but—it will not do any good."

"Why?"

"Because he will make me marry him——" She spoke dreamily, slowly, as if she were hardly conscious of the need for speech.

"Why?" he snapped, suddenly fierce in one of his curious changes of mood.

"He will make me marry him."

"He can't! How could he force you?"

Maria faced him. "He can—make me want to."

"But if you love Prince Fritz——"

"Listen, Alexander Grigorovitch; try to understand. I am so lonely; my life in Paris is a life of hard work; my voice is not a success; some day, when I am very unhappy about Fritz and he, Ferrari, is very kind to me—I shall say yes, just to try to forget Fritz; just—Oh, I can't explain—because, in a way, he pleases me, because something about him *deadens* things in me——"

The dwarf nodded gravely. He understood. He knew far better than she did what she was honestly trying to express.

"That would," he said, "be an unworthy thing."

"Yes. It would be very bad. But—I think it must be a little like hypnotism—I should one day be unable to resist."

"And how can I help you?"

She rose, thrusting her hands deep into her jacket pockets.

"I want," she replied, "to go to Sarmania. I want you to take me."

"Me? To take you to Sarmania?" he shouted, shooting to the ground, and staring white-faced up at her.

"Yes. I have been thinking, and I know that if I could see Fritz again it would help me—help me not to marry Ferrari; not to do an unworthy thing."

"But—how could you go?"

"I shall go to Paris to-morrow morning, and then you—Oh, Mr. Tomsk, you *will* take me?"

Tomsk's face grew thunderous.

"Why do you ask *me?*"

This time she saw the danger. "Because you are the only real friend I have."

"Ah! But—supposing we were there at Ipniz—you couldn't see the King."

She flushed crimson. "Yes, I could! He should not see me, but I—in the Cathedral I could see him. Oh, Tomsk, be kind to me."

He did not answer and she went on, all barriers now down. "I do so want to be good. And—that is the only way. I shall love him more than ever when I have seen him, and—and then Ferrari will not have that queer power over me."

Tomsk held out his hand gravely, and she took it.

"I will take you to Ipniz," he said. "I will do all that you wish me to——" and he kissed her hand.

CHAPTER XIV

IPNIZ in the early autumn is a very delightful place. It lies high enough for the air to be bracing, but it is so sheltered that no wind ever rakes its streets. It is as windless a town as there is in the world.

On the evening when Maria Drello and Tomsk arrived there from Vienna, the houses were hung with pieces of brocade and tapestry, and garlands of fresh roses were everywhere.

A group of bloused workmen were busy in the square in front of the hotel, arranging the fountain for the next day's festive flow of red wine.

The broad shaft of light admitted through the gap in the mountains lay across the place diagonally, and in its pleasant warmth lay, unmolested, several beggars.

Maria stood on her balcony, watching the scene. She was very tired, but glowing with excitement. Her overmastering desire to see Fritz once more was to be appeased. It was much to her even to be breathing approximately the same air that was giving life to him in his palace, the lights of which were just beginning to pierce the slowly gathering dusk. He was then behind the ancient stone walls above her, and for

the moment, his love letter hidden in her bosom, the poodle-haired German girl who was to be his wife the next day did not matter.

She had said good night to Tomsk on arriving, and knew his delicacy would prevent his trying to see her. Besides, the poor little man was faint with fatigue, and would be going to bed soon.

And here was she, Maria Drello, of St. Anne's Terrace, Kensington, and of the street of the Lyre, Paris, alone on a balcony at Ipniz, watching the preparations for the Royal wedding to-morrow. The situation seemed unreal, impossible, incredibly romantic.

Two immense mountaineers passed by, pausing to watch the workmen at the fountain.

They were talking animatedly, but without gesticulation, except for curiously expressive movements of the head.

Maria hesitated a moment and then put on her hat and went downstairs.

The landlord spoke French and was very communicative.

"Monsieur had explained that mademoiselle his sister was to describe the wedding in a great London paper," he began, "so he, Sherkèt, would see that mademoiselle had a good place from which to see the ceremony. It was too unfortunate that the eyes of mademoiselle were so bad!"

"My eyes?" she asked, not understanding.

"But yes—that mademoiselle was forced to wear dark glasses in the sun! Monsieur her brother had

explained, but Sherkèt was many times desolated, so tactlessly to have referred to the matter."

"*Il n'y a pas de quoi*," she assured him gravely. "It is only, as my brother says, that my eyes are very sensitive to strong light."

He then described the festivities that were to take place in the town.

"His Majesty King Fedèk would, according to an ancient custom, walk down from the castle quite alone.

He would go to the old fountain, and with his own hand fill a blue rock-crystal beaker with wine and drink it—still alone.

Then he would kneel at the open door of the Cathedral and wait until his bride came.

"And the Princess?" Maria asked, still too pervaded by a sense of adventure, of unreality, to feel anything more than a friendly curiosity about the bride.

Ah, yes! The Princess was lodged in the palace of the German Minister, on the far side of the town, near the new park. She would be driven to the church in the state coach, drawn by three white horses.

"It will be a beautiful fête," Maria observed.

"Ah, yes! Largesse for the poor, wine and food for all—much rejoicing!"

"And the King? I suppose," she went on, her hand at her breast where the letter lay, "that he is very happy?"

The innkeeper nodded. "His Majesty is young and handsome and rich, and now there comes to him a beautiful bride! *Que voulez-vous!*"

"She is beautiful then?"

The worthy man turned, surprised at the change in his patron's voice. He was more surprised by the change in her face.

"Mademoiselle is not well—she is pale."

"No, it is nothing. I have had a long journey, and am tired," she protested, "that is all."

But he insisted on her sitting down and drinking something to make her better.

While he was away getting it for her, she lay with closed eyes, really nearly ill with emotion.

It seemed that for the first time she fully realized that Fritz was to be married. It seemed like a fresh piece of news—and she hated the Princess.

"Jealous fool," she said to herself, over and over. "Idiot to come here! Fool, fool!"

The landlord returned with a squat glass on a little wooden tray.

"This is our national beverage," he explained, "and it will strengthen you. It is made of herbs."

She drank it, and then went out into the dusk, wondering where she had already tasted the green, thick liqueur, with its peculiar bouquet.

The workmen had gone, and so had the strip of sunlight. The sky was rosy in the west and the moon hung in a little halo of mist.

She crossed the square and walked slowly down the street.

At the doors stood and sat the housewives, as they do in Italy and Spain, chattering together, and enjoying their few minutes of leisure.

Ordinary looking women, for the most part, with

a leaven of broad-eyed, dark-haired ones, whose coloring attested to mixed blood.

The babies were enchanting, as fat and, even now in September, nearly as naked, as little Indians.

Everyone stared at the strange lady, but she was too much like one of their own mountain women to excite them overmuch.

The street was narrow, and at the foot of a long slope turned abruptly to the left, descending in a series of cobbled terraces to a river, over which stretched an old stone bridge.

Maria went halfway down to the bridge and then toiled wearily back to the square.

A boy was driving a flock of goats in front of her, and presently he stopped and a dozen children, each one carrying an earthenware jug, surrounded him.

Maria heard the hissing of the milk as the boy milked his goats.

Presently she came to where the street led up to the castle.

She stood still, looking up the narrow, dark slope. It was here that the mother of Niklas had led Ferrari the morning after he had first seen her.

Suddenly she remembered. It was Ferrari who, when she had paled on hearing him say that the child was speaking Sarmanian, had given her the liqueur the landlord had given her an hour ago!

She walked slowly up the street, down which the King would in a few hours walk, alone, to meet his bride.

And he loved her, Maria! He would not know that

if they were stuffed with cotton wool; she thought for a moment that she was going to die. And then he was past, and, walking with a sudden bracing-up of his whole figure, as if he were conscious that dozens of eyes might be on him, he went into the palace.

CHAPTER XV

YES—it is better; it is decidedly better, Miss Drello," the great man said.

Maria stood before him, her hands clasped loosely before her.

She smiled a little wanly. "Is it then," she asked, "good?"

Possibly he could have lied on any other subject in the world; on this one he could not lie.

"Good?" he hesitated. "I could not quite say that. But it is much better. In fact," warming a little, "it is better than I ever dared hope it would be. But——"

"But?"

"There is," he said slowly, "a—a certain lack——"

It was May, young, beautiful May in Paris. Paris smelt of lilacs and asphalt; Paris was at its youngest.

Maria wore a linen frock and a beflowered hat. She, too, was beautiful. The great man looked at her regretfully.

"Then," she asked, with the simplicity that was to him so attractive, "it's—no good?"

"Don't say that. It *is* some good. But—I can only repeat that there is a curious lack—and I fear I cannot tell you what it is. Possibly I am the wrong man for you."

He was infinitely kind; infinitely gentle.

"Do you think," she insisted, as gently as he himself, "that I had better go on with it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "How can I tell? You sing well; your technique is admirable, admirable; your voice is in itself very fine. But——"

She did not insist further. She was utterly discouraged. An hour later she stood on her old balcony in the Rue de la Lyre, watching the people busy in the street below.

Spring is either the happiest or the most miserable season of the year; to happy women its every mood is a delight; to unhappy women it is a season of poignant pain and heartbreak.

Maria Drello was very unhappy.

She was twenty-seven years old, alone, and, she now for the first time fully acknowledged to herself, a failure.

And she felt, as she stood there in the sun, tired to death.

Down in the street the busy people went about their work cheerfully with the inherent merriness of their race; the old dyer was whistling as he hung out in the air long strips of silk freshly soaked in crimson dye that dripped like blood on the stones.

A man with a barrow was selling vegetables and busy women bought of him, chaffering, bargaining. Every one of the women, Maria felt, was buying for someone she loved—for a man, or for children.

Only she, Maria, was utterly alone. Alone and a failure.

A bird in a wooden cage hung in an opposite window, and its owner, a blind girl, was coaxing it to sing. First, the blind girl piped to the bird, then the bird piped to the blind girl.

"And I," Maria said aloud to herself in sudden bitterness, "have not even a bird!"

She was in a dangerous mood of self-pity, and had not sufficient sense of humor to laugh at herself. Presently she brought a small chair out on the balcony and sat down.

The mellow sunlight fell full on her beautiful face, showing certain small lines that were beginning to mark it. She looked older than she was.

The bird opposite, persuaded by the blind girl, burst into a bubbling melody, and several people in the street heard it and looked up, smiling with pleasure in the woodland sound.

Maria sat with folded hands, thinking.

And as she thought her doorbell rang, and her little maid appeared.

"Mademoiselle," she said, "there is a gentleman."

Maria rose.

"Ferrari!"

Vincenzo Ferrari bowed, his mouth twisting in a nervous waver to a sarcastic smile.

"You don't mind me coming?"

"I am very glad to see you."

"It has been a long time—but to-day, somehow," he returned, "I felt that I must see you."

He wore well-cut blue clothes and there was a rose in his coat. He looked gay and prosperous.

"We will have tea," she said, laughing. "I know that you despise tea, but no one, not even you, could drink coffee at this hour!"

"You still have the coffee machine?"

"Yes. If you really *could* drink coffee, I will make you some."

He shook his head. "No, thanks; not even I want coffee to-day. I have come to ask you a favor, Miss Drello. I wonder if you will grant it?"

For the first time she saw that he was nervous; that the lines in his face had deepened; that his curls were dappled with gray.

"It is a long time since I have seen you," she said, after a pause.

"Yes. It is three years—and my favor—will you grant it?"

"If I can."

"It is this, then. Miss Drello—I am a very lonely brute. And you will admit that I have not bothered you, have I? Well," he went on without waiting for an answer, "to-day is my birthday and I think—I rather think, I want to have a party. Will you be my birthday party and come with me to Fontainebleau?"

There was a short pause, and then she said: "Yes, I will: I should like to. It is a very sad day, and it will be good to—to escape it."

"It will be just as sad in the wood, you know."

But she smiled, shaking her head. "Oh, no; it shan't be a sad party. I—I am glad to see you again, Mr. Navarre, and we will have a delightful time."

He had a hired motor car at the door, and on the floor was a flat hamper. "Food," he explained as she sat down, "trout in jelly, and so on."

"Then—you were sure I would go?"

"No," he answered calmly, "but I was sure someone would."

It was so exactly like him to make such a remark that she burst out laughing as the car moved off. "Was I first or second choice?" she asked.

"What you have always been: first."

For a while neither of them spoke, and then he made a suggestion. "I want to know all about you, Miss Drello, all that has happened since London. But I want to know really, consecutively, not a bit of news here and a bit there—you know what I mean. So I will not ask you any questions until we get to the forest, and then you will tell me as a narrative."

"Very well—only there is little to relate."

When at last they were sitting under a great tree, their luncheon basket beside them, she told her story.

"Well—when I came back that time," she began, "I found my father ill. He had had a slight stroke. In December he died."

"I am sorry for that, Miss Drello."

"In the spring," she pursued, "my brother and his wife moved into our old house, and I stayed with them until the autumn, when I came back here. And, I have been here ever since—that is all."

Vincenzo Ferrari leaned back against his tree and laughed softly. "Not all, Miss Drello! I saw Jacques de Breux the other day, and he was telling me that

your life has not been nearly so dull as your story sounds."

She looked at him with a frown. "What do you mean?"

"Only what I said. That you have not been dull."

"I know many people and go out, in a mild way, a good deal—I have not seen the De Breux's for a long time. How are they?"

"Well—she is going to have a child very soon and they are very happy about it."

"But tell me about your little boy. Where is he, and how?"

"With his mother. He is very tall now, and handsome."

"He must be. And now," she added; "tell me about yourself."

"I am," he declared, "greatly flattered by your wish to know about me. However, my life has been as —dull as yours. After my little mishap in London, I went to Algiers and then came back in the spring. I had to go to Italy, and have stayed there pretty well ever since. That is about all."

It was very still in the forest, for they had walked some distance before sitting down and were far from the road.

They looked at each other defiantly, each conscious that the other's story had been told with many reservations, each recalling things he or she had kept back.

Presently, without a warning smile even, Ferrari burst into a roar of laughter, showing every tooth in his head.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried, beating the ground with his hands, "how dull we are, how uninteresting—and—what liars!"

She laughed, too. "Yes. That is, I am a little, and you certainly are very much of a liar. However, can't we eat? I am dreadfully hungry——"

For no apparent reason her spirits had gone up with a rush when he laughed. His laugh had always been the thing about him that she most liked; she had often recalled it, and she was glad to hear it again.

After all, it was good to be alive, good to be twenty-seven—the age which had seemed to her so venerable and so hopeless only two hours before—instead of fifty; it was good to be sitting here on the ground under the trees; good to hear birds sing.

They had jellied trout for lunch, and cold chicken, eggs, *pâté de foie gras*, and little cakes of all kinds. They had a merry meal, and gradually told each other details of their lives during the last four years.

"Where is Tomsk?" Ferrari asked at length, opening a bottle of champagne by twisting the wire with his fingers. "I shall never forget his battle with poor old Thimblebee."

"Ah, Tomsk," she said gently, "he is in Paris. He has lived here for three years."

"Do you see him often?" He looked at her curiously.

"No, but I like knowing that he is near—I am very fond of Alexander Grigorovitch."

"He loves you," Ferrari declared.

She did not answer.

She drank her wine, and Ferrari, who never touched it, smoked and watched her in lazy comfort.

"Where did you go that time when you ran away from me?" he asked suddenly.

"I will not tell you that, Mr. Ferrari——"

"Then I will tell you. Tomsk and you went to Ipniz. Did you think a woman like you could travel about with a dwarf and not be noticed, and remembered?"

Slowly, painfully, she flushed, her lower lip drawn in under her teeth.

"Tell me how you know," she said faintly.

Ferrari laughed. "Well—I was there two years ago. I painted the Queen. Oh," he went on, raising his hand to insure her silence, "I have become a well-known portrait-painter since I saw you. I am a fairly rich man now. However, when I was in Ipniz I was told of the beautiful lady who came to the Royal wedding with a monster——"

"Alexander Grigorovitch is *not* a monster," she broke in indignantly.

"That's what they call him in Ipniz. So I talked to the Queen about it."

He watched her, his opaque brown eyes fixed with interest.

"And what did the Queen say?" Maria's voice was perfectly even.

"She said she saw Tomsk on her way to the Cathedral to be married, and was glad, because a male dwarf is lucky. She did not see you."

"Did you tell my name?"

"No, I did not."

There was a long silence. It was a warm day and the sunlight was dropping down on the grass and bracken through leaves of vivid green.

Maria was very happy. She had forgotten her master's verdict on her voice; she had forgotten that she was a lonely old creature of twenty-seven.

It was the old story; Vincenzo Ferrari, with his loosely set eyes and his deft brown hands, had a charm for her that made her forget things.

When they reached her door he came inside with her.

"Thank you for coming——" he said softly, his eyes glowing.

She looked at him. "I loved coming," she said.

"May I kiss you—for my birthday?"

She bowed her head in silence, and his carefully pent-up feelings burst their bounds.

He took her in his arms and kissed her as if he could never stop.

Then, without a word, he left her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE next evening Maria stood before her glass while her little maid hooked her frock. She was going to a play, and then to supper with some French and American friends, and her frock was new, a lovely thing of sunshine-colored crêpe de chine. The room was lit by candles and a lamp which stood on the table at the head of her bed, and as it was a wet, windy evening, and two windows were open half way, the light in the room had an unstable, flickering quality that was, while uncomfortable to its occupants, very beautiful.

As the little flames leaped and died, they threw delicate shadows on the walls, on the simple furniture, and on the graceful figures of the two women. Two of the Chinese chairs that had been in her room at home had migrated hither with her, and the little bookcase hung, as it had always hung, at the head of her bed.

The Millais portrait of her mother was here, too, and one chair covered with the blue chintz that had shaded the windows in her old room.

Her dressing-table was decked with muslin like the one at home, but the much darned bed curtains no longer existed, and the bed was a cheap brass

one she had bought on first coming to the Street of the Lyre.

"Mademoiselle is very thin," the small Hortense observed; "Ah, in these thick-waisted days a slim figure is a joy to the eyes!"

"Yes. Hurry, Hortense, or I shall be late"—Maria spoke absently. She was extremely tired, for she had not slept the night before, and her day had been a busy one.

She was pale, her eyes had dark rings round them, and her very lips were nearly colorless. "I am not in great beauty to-night, Hortense," she declared, with a little laugh. "Madame Weston will wish she hadn't invited me——"

"Madame Veston," remarked the maid shrewdly, "will not be sorry that Mademoiselle is not at her best!"

"Hortense!"

"But, yes, mademoiselle. Madame Veston is a great American beauty—like all American ladies, *du reste* —but she is at least thirty-five. Oh, *I* know, me! My sister is young, like mademoiselle, and there is a friend of hers who is very beautiful—I know how she sometimes hates Simone just because she is young. Oh, mademoiselle," she concluded, stepping back and surveying her mistress as if she herself had not only hooked the gown, but made it—"I tell myself sometimes that there is no situation between the great and rich that cannot be found to exist somewhere among the humble and poor!"

Maria, as the lawless taxi driver dashed his zig-zag,

perilous way through the crowded streets, remembered Hortense's words, and saw their truth.

She wondered whether the young Simone, for instance, loved some man snatched by destiny to a sphere unattainable to her—a nobleman's butler, for instance; and she wondered had the girl another suitor, a dashing, dangerous chauffeur, perhaps, to correspond to Ferrari?

She had been all day nervous and restless. She had half hoped, half feared that he would come, but he had not appeared, or indeed made any sign of life. She was not analytical enough to observe, in the way she now felt, signs of the changes that had taken place in her nature since she had been at Ipniz.

There was far less of struggle in her now against his old charm for her. Indeed, she unconsciously welcomed it.

She remembered their short engagement, and the curious way in which this charm had held her, even though she knew she did not love him. And from the day she left London to meet Tomsk in Paris she had neither seen nor heard from Ferrari!

The taxi crossed a bridge and narrowly escaped being crushed like a beetle between a big car and a van. Everybody swore; everybody shouted; insults were hurled, and fists shaken.

Maria watched the scene absently, quite unmoved by the excitement; she lived in Paris.

In the cloak-room at the "Ritz" she found Mrs. Weston outlining the scarlet of her lips with a pencil.

"*Darling!*"

"Dear, how are you!" Maria had learned how to gush, in a mild way, but Margot Weston was born to exaggeration in every sense.

Her white satin skirt looked, at a short distance, like one leg of a dazzling pyjama; her bodice was of the scantiest; her head, round which the hair was tightly swathed, looked as if it had been shaved and then artistically varnished.

And all her friends were darlings.

Turning from the triple glass in which she had been examining the results of her two hours' long toilet, Mrs. Weston kissed Maria, but mincingly, out of respect for the bloom of her own lips.

"Altimonti couldn't come," she announced, "his wife has turned up—but Von Lennichstein is here, and De Montignolles and Delgado—also an American, a Bawston man whom I met to-day in the Bois—hadn't seen him for years, darling——" Her voice tailed off into an inarticulate murmur. A tall woman in black had just come in. "Worth," Mrs. Weston declared, in a rapturous undertone; "I wonder where she got that lace——?"

A few minutes later Maria found herself sitting at Mrs. Weston's table, between Graf von Lennichstein and Mr. Gerald Peck, the American who had been met by his hostess in a place known to her as the "Bwaw."

The other woman of the party was a Mrs. Cornelius, an extremely blonde Swede, whose milk-white neck and bosom were almost completely hidden by a plastron of turquoises.

It was a noisy party; a polyglot party; an egregious

party, made toward its end more egregious still by the arrival of two extremely swarthy South Americans.

The languages were English, American, Spanish, German, French, and Chilian (which last was declared by its adherents to be pure Castilian). There were also: American-French; English-French; French-English; German-French; German-English; French-German; Spanish-French; Chilian-French; Swedish-English; Swedish-French.

Much champagne was drunk; many cigarettes consumed; peaches as large as great apples were eaten. Altogether, Mrs. Weston felt, with pride, a most distinguished and cosmopolitan party.

Mr. Peck, the American, was at the end of dinner nearly half drunk, but this peculiarity was not greatly minded. Mrs. Weston, indeed, teased him about it, and called him a bad boy.

Both of the South Americans were making love to Mrs. Cornelius, and De Montignolles, "one of the oldest Royalist families, my dear"—this was the hint, earlier in the evening, confided to Maria—was swearing that until he had loved his hostess he had been an utter stranger to the tender passion.

Finally the party moved on. The women, except Maria, made up in the cloak-room, lending each other lip pencils, and suggesting little improvements in the matter of powder and paint to each other in affectionate voices.

"Your lips are still pale, Maria, dearest," Mrs. Weston remarked. "Do you feel ill?"

"No. Tired, that's all."

"Well, look here. Just put on a little color! Heaven knows you need it more than I do. Just look at my face—Henri has really been *too* outrageous tonight! That man would make," she added, "a brass monkey blush!"

Maria looked at herself in the glass.

She did indeed look pale, compared to the other two women.

Slowly she took the lip pencil Mrs. Weston was holding out to her, and with a little shudder applied it to her pale mouth.

At about half past twelve that night the party "rounded up," as Mr. Peck put it, at the Abbaye de Thélème.

They had engaged a table, and champagne in buckets of ice was ready for them.

It was only two hours since they had left the table, but Peck had ordered what seemed to Maria to be another dinner.

The place was filling rapidly, and noisy with polyglot talk and laughter.

Maria had been there several times, but it always interested her, probably because she little belonged there.

The closeness of the air was appalling now that it was full of highly scented women.

A man who looked like, but was not, Ferrari was making love to a pretty harlot at the next table. Maria wondered if Ferrari ever came there.

She was desperately tired, but the unwholesome ex-

citement of such places roused her, as did the iced champagne.

Delgado, the Spaniard, and Peck, who were her neighbors, were making love to her. Her immobility pleased them, and the talk and the wine had given her a sudden, brilliant color. Mrs. Cornelius was trying to bring about a quarrel between the two South Americans, Mrs. Weston was for the moment listening to the German, the only one of the men who was completely sober.

The orchestra was playing a tango, and the professional dancers had begun their curious evolutions.

As they did it two men and a lovely hussy came in and stood looking for a table.

Maria's heart gave a great bound, the younger of the men looked so like Prince Fritz.

Her dark brows contracted, and she bit her lip.

It seemed to her cruel that after so many years a chance resemblance should so move her.

"You look ill, Miss Drello," Mr. Peck observed, "it is the heat. Drink your champagne." She took up the glass when he had filled it.

"Men drink, don't they," she asked slowly, "when they want to forget things?"

He was not perfectly sober, but he understood.

"Yes, I suppose so; or—when they want to be happy; spirits are no good to make people cheerful; that is why the English as a race are so dull and bored, because they drink whisky and brandy. But the juice of the v-vine, Miss Drello, *that's* what makes a person

cheerfuller and cheerfuller. Come—drink your champagne and cheer up."

She drank a little, but he urged her to take more.

"It's no good that way," he declared, leaning toward her; "empty your glass and don't think about it —or him?—any longer!"

She obeyed. She emptied her glass and set it down with a little defiant bang.

As she did so she noticed the young man who looked as Fritz had looked six and a half years ago. The wine went to her head a little; she felt happier, and told herself that she would not be such a fool as to waste more thoughts on that old story. She was glad, she decided, that Ferrari had come back. He was like champagne—he made her forget. At that moment three men rose from a table off to her left, exposing to view the occupants of a table she had not noticed.

"Look," Mrs. Weston exclaimed shrilly, proud of her knowledge, "there's Mimi de Montmorency and Fanfan de Choiseul. Heavens, what pearls!"

The two women, well known cocottes, sat facing each other, their profiles turned to Mrs. Weston's party. The man facing Maria was a German-looking man with yellow hair cut *en brosse* and an extremely high collar. The man facing him was more thickly set, and broader across the shoulders.

Maria could not see his face, but something about him seemed familiar to her.

As she gazed at the women, whose names she had often heard, the thick-set man turned and met her eyes.

It was the King of Sarmania.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR what seemed to her an eternity his eyes held hers. Then he turned away and spoke rapidly to the man opposite to him.

Every one in Mrs. Weston's party was talking loudly, the music was deafening, the smell of mingled scents was overpowering.

Maria leaned back in her chair, terrified lest any one should look at her. But no one did, her pallor went unnoticed.

Some one had launched into the air a flock of delicately tinted butterflies, tiny mechanical toys that flew about for a moment before they dropped. This phenomenon was greeted with shrill, affected cries of delight by the women at the tables.

Maria sat, her eyes half closed, looking under their lids at Fritz's back.

It seemed to her almost a miracle, that she should almost have thought she saw him only five minutes before she really did.

"Have some frozen strawberries, Miss Drello?"

"No—no, thanks, Mr. Peck——"

"You are too dull for words, darling," shrieked Mrs. Weston, as the orchestra struck up a tango, "wake up and amuse poor Gerald. Oh, who's this?"

"Do you remember me, Miss Drello," some one else was saying—"Mr. Frederick——"

She looked up at him as he stood by her, and then, to her own intense relief, Maria heard herself saying quietly, "Of course I remember you—Mr. Frederick. How do you do?"

They shook hands, and he went on, "I am very glad to see you again. How is your brother, is he here, too?"

He looked so much older than as she remembered him, that he might almost have been the father of the youth whose resemblance to his old self had so upset her.

"No, my brother is not here."

Taking from his breast pocket a small note-book, he went on, "Where are you staying? You must allow me to come and see you."

The others gazed curiously at him as she gave her address, but he took no notice of them.

"Thanks," he said quietly, "I will come to-morrow at four."

Then, with a bow, he went back to his own table.

"Well, I call that cheek," Mrs. Weston burst out, "to come to speak to a guest of mine straight from those women!"

"Nonsense," retorted Peck, who had had a good deal of champagne, "you don't come here to see nuns, do you?" Von Lennichstein pulled at his mustache thoughtfully. "His face was very familiar," he said, "is he, may I ask, an Englishman?"

Maria shook her head. "No."

Delgado, an enormously rich Spaniard, who traveled a good deal, frowned in a puzzled way. "His face is familiar to me, too, but I think that it is only that he bears a vague resemblance to some Royalty——"

He had not spoken to Maria, so she was not forced to answer him. She leaned back in her chair, and began eating the iced strawberries that in spite of her refusing them had been put before her. Even yet she could hardly believe that it was really true; that Fritz was then within a stone's throw of her, and that she was to see him the next day.

It seemed like a beautiful, absurd dream. When, an hour later, she reached her room, she lit all the candles and sat down on one of the red lacquer chairs.

She was like some one watching a series of magic-lantern pictures thrown on a sheet; she seemed to see again that meeting of theirs in the Abbey; she remembered the shock with which she first met his bold eyes; her walk between him and Lurty in the sun; then came the picture of herself and Fritz in the drawing-room, the day of his first call; her pinafore, and her flowers; then—the scene in the gardens when she had been so puzzled by his manner.

She recalled even the little flowers in the grass, and the nurses and children hurrying homeward in fear of a coming storm that after all never came.

She sat on and on in the old chair, one vision after the other rising before her.

She saw Tomsk as, at the foot of the stairs in her father's house, he jubilantly told her that Fritz was

to be sent to Sarmania. Poor Tomsk, how variable his moods were, even yet!

It was on one of these red chairs that she had laid her wedding dress and veil when she took them off, knowing that she was never to wear them.

The brass bedstead disappeared, and she beheld the delicately darned curtains under which she had slept these nights when she had a right to dream of Prince Fritz; surely, just outside that window there stood a great cedar tree?

It was as if her whole youth was being marshaled before her, she recalled things long, at least half forgotten, such as his having stolen from her work-basket a little green silk bag full of lavender flowers.

She wondered if he still had it—forgotten, of course, but still hidden away among his old treasures? She wondered if he had destroyed her few letters. She had every one of his, locked away in a sandal-wood box that had belonged to her mother, and which still contained the treasure her mother had put in it—a little blue woollen shoe that Maria's baby brother Sebastian had worn.

She wondered if Fritz's hair still smelled of brilliantine? Her father had liked Fritz, who had admired the beautiful old man.

Shortly before his death Drello had, for the first time since the breaking of the engagement, spoken to his daughter of her lover.

"He was a charming fellow, my dear, a charming fellow, Fritz," he said, "I have always been sorry it had to be given up."

"Have you, father, dear?"

"Yes. I liked him. I suppose you never hear from him?" He looked wistfully at her as he spoke, and when she shook her head in silence he went on: "No one would mind dying if they knew that they could continue to be curious in their graves. It saddens me to think that in a little while I shall no longer be interested in you——"

Suddenly Maria raised her head and saw that the sun was streaming in on her. She had dreamed the night through.

"Le Comte de Vecshof" was the name on the card brought to her mistress by Hortense the next day, just as the clock struck four.

The King of Sarmania, ushered into the pretty, cool-looking room, shook hands gravely with his hostess.

"So you live here?"

"I have lived here for years, sir."

"Don't call me sir; we are old friends, and even kings," he added, a little bitterly, "have a few friends who call them by their Christian names."

She did not answer. Her blush had not died down since he entered, it seemed to ebb and flow as if her heart would never again allow it to be quiet.

"Ah," he ejaculated suddenly, "you still do that! I am glad. You have not changed, except that you are thinner——. Did you know me at once last night?"

"Yes. At once."

"But I have changed——?" His blue eyes, heavier than they used to be, and more wrinkled than they

should have been at his age, gazed at her inquiringly.

"Yes, you have changed. But I knew you at once." Then she told him of the youth who looked like him.

"Who were your friends?" he asked, when she had finished speaking.

"Oh, just people—nobody in particular——"

"I did not like them for you," he said.

There was a long pause.

"Tell me about your life, Miss Drello—I want to know all about you——"

She told him, as she had told Ferrari a few hours before. It seemed to her years since she had sat under the trees at Fontainebleau. She could hardly remember his face now, his vivid face that had charmed her.

But she made no mention of her visit to Ipniz.

"I have often wondered about you," he said gently, after a pause. "I should have liked to write, but of course I could not. I had no right to——. Of course you got my letter, the one I *did* write?" he added, his voice changing abruptly.

"Yes."

"Why did you not answer it?"

There was peremptoriness in his manner and his eyes darkened in the way she remembered. For a moment she could hardly speak. Then she answered, "What could I say to you? You are a king."

"Your silence hurt me."

"I am sorry."

An odd constraint had come between them, reminding the girl of her embarrassment as they walked up Birdcage Walk the morning they met.

"How is—Princess Anne?" she asked, with an effort.

"Ah, yes, poor Anne! I had forgotten that you knew her. I have not seen her for years, but she writes to me." After a moment's hesitation he added, "She is my son's godmother."

Maria rose and rang the bell. "You will allow me to give you tea?" she said.

For half an hour they chatted about indifferent subjects, and then he rose to take leave of her.

"I may come again?" he asked ceremoniously. "I shall be in Paris another week——"

She looked away, and made a little bow that partook in some subtle way of the nature of a curtsey. "I shall be delighted," she said.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW it was managed Maria did not know, but the King of Sarmania's incognito was absolutely respected by the French press.

Two days passed; Maria dined with Mrs. Cornelius, meeting nearly the same people who had been Mrs. Weston's guests at the "Ritz," but no one mentioned "Mr. Frederick," and no one hinted that the demure-looking hotel in the Place de la Vendôme harbored Majesty.

On the day after his visit Maria received, with Count Vecshof's card, a box of white and red roses. Then came silence.

On the third evening Tomsk dined in the Street of the Harp.

Time had dealt mercifully with the dwarf. His thick black hair was streaked with gray, but his face was unchanged. He was well dressed in ordinary evening clothes, and, as usual, looked very impressive so long as he was seated.

"I have brought you these songs," he began, laying a roll of music on the table. "You will like them, but I must teach them to you. No Pole ever understood Russian music. Bah! I despise Poles!"

"Paderewski is a Pole."

The little man gave an indignant snort. "And I, Tomsk, am a Russian."

His peculiarities were less marked as he grew older, probably because a legacy of which he had never spoken to Maria, but which was the cause of his giving up his accompanying work, had, by allowing him various comforts and some luxuries, soothed his vanity and made him feel less at the mercy of the world.

He had come to Paris, as Maria told Ferrari, about a year after her settling there, and they were in a queer way great friends, although he rarely consented to meeting any other of her friends.

He lived in a small flat near St. Sulpice, whither he had transported his enormous furniture, and whither, when Maria had need of him, she had but to send him a line to have him with her in what seemed to be an incredibly short time.

That May morning she had not seen him for over a fortnight, and it transpired that he had been away.

"I just ran over to London on business," he explained.

"Oh, Alexander Grigorovitch, did you see any one I know?"

"Yes. I saw Miss Gryce—at Sulzer's funeral."

"Is he dead? Poor Herr Sulzer; I am sorry."

"That is foolish."

"I am sorry," she explained, "not for him, but for myself. It makes me feel just a little more——"

"Than what?" snapped the dwarf.

"Yes—don't be cross—I *am* alone. Did you see my brother?"

"I did. I went to call on him at his office. He is getting very fat, but looks well. He sent you his love."

"Thanks. Did he say anything about my sister-in-law?" Maria very rarely heard from either of them, and knew that it was Doris's fault.

"Yes, there is going to be another baby. That," he added, "is a good thing. The only thing to keep her straight."

"Tomsk!"

"Well, it's true. She is a horrid little creature," he declared, with contempt.

They sat on the balcony after dinner, drinking their coffee. It was a fine evening, warm and starry; from a little old forgotten garden somewhere near came the scent of lilacs.

"There are those mysterious lilacs blooming again," the dwarf observed, lighting a cigarette. "This is the third year we have smelled but never seen them."

"I wonder where the garden is," Maria answered, "I should love to see it."

"And I should not love to see it." His voice, in spite of the flat contradiction it conveyed, was dreamy. "That is the poetry of it, Miss Drello. Every spring we remember it by the scent of lilacs, and we can imagine it to be anything we like; it may have an old fountain in it, or a statue, or a sundial—whereas, if we saw it—it may be just two or three trees in a builder's yard, or even a place where cattle wait to go into a slaughter-house to be killed——"

Maria listened idly; she was used to his way of think-

ing, and liked the sound of his soft voice even when she did not listen to what he said.

Presently his face clouded as if he had suddenly had an unpleasant thought.

"Miss Drello," he asked, "that man is back?"

She jumped, blushing with surprise. "How did you know?"

"I know many things. I wish he had not come back; he will cause trouble."

"How will he cause trouble?"

"He will make love to you—and you will let him. And then you will be unhappy again."

"He will not make love to me again," she answered indignantly. "I have seen him, and he did not. You have no right to say such things."

The dwarf looked bewildered. "'Such things'? But there's no harm in *his* wanting to marry you——"

As he spoke the maid appeared in the window, a card in her hand, and close behind her sounded footsteps. Tomsk, perched in an uncomfortable French chair, could see only Maria, but he knew from her face that something unusual was going to happen. He had never seen quite that look in her eyes. He knew, with the curious intuition that made him at times so uncanny, that the man behind the servant was Prince Fritz.

When the maid had gone Prince Fritz came out on the balcony. He did not see the dwarf, and shook hands with Maria, believing himself to be alone with her.

"You do not mind my coming?" he asked.

"No. I am glad." Apparently she, too, now, was unaware of her other guest.

In the light from the opposite windows their two faces were quite distinct to him.

"Maria," the King of Sarmania said, "since I saw you I have thought of nothing but you."

His bold eyes stared into hers in the intrinsically but very beautiful way that moved her with such appalling strength. Again she blushed, catching at the railing for support.

"Oh, Fritz!" she murmured weakly.

"Will you not introduce me to your friend?"

Tomsk's voice, crisp with displeased excitement, startled, almost frightened, them both.

"I am the Count of Vecshof," the King announced briefly, and Maria hastily introduced the dwarf, who had slid off his chair and made a low bow.

"Mr. Tomsk is a very old friend of mine," Maria went on.

"Indeed." It was obvious that Count Vecshof expected the privileges due to a king. It was clear that he wished Tomsk to go.

But Tomsk swung himself up to his chair.

"Have you been long in Paris, M. le Comte?" he asked, with grave courtesy.

"Only a few days, and—I am leaving to-morrow night," Fritz added for Maria's benefit.

She started. She could not speak; the situation was beyond her. She saw that Fritz, by preserving his incognito, had put himself into Tomsk's hands. There was a long silence, after which Tomsk spoke slowly.

"I am glad I have not to take a journey to-morrow," he declared; "traveling tires me. Once I traveled for two days without stopping. It was a dreadful journey, but I took it gladly, because it was for a friend. A friend whom I love very much wished to take that journey, and she could not go alone."

The King raised his light eyebrows, and his blue eyes stared at the queer interloper.

"Ah?"

"Yes. This lady wanted to go, on the occasion of a Royal wedding—to go to a town called Ipniz. *I took her there.*"

Fritz glanced at Maria.

"Yes, it is true," she said faintly. "Alexander Grigorovitch is my best and kindest friend."

"But you were at Ipniz? You saw me there?" His face was pale, and he had quite forgotten the dwarf.

"Yes."

"I thank you, Mr. Tomsk," the King said, bringing himself back to the present with an effort. "I see that you know me——"

"Your Majesty." The bow of Tomsk was a thing magnificent, never to be forgotten. "I never forget a face."

"And that is supposed to be one of *our* prerogatives! I am delighted," the King went on, "to have met you, and I hope you will allow me to send you, through Miss Drello, a little souvenir of your visit to my capital. Good night, Mr. Tomsk."

Then the thing happened in Tomsk's brain that was

so pitiful. Some little thing went wrong, and he lost his control of the situation.

His face changed, darkened, and his eyes blazed.

"Don't you hurt her," he said, forgetting the kingship of the man he addressed; "if you hurt her you—you will have to deal with *me*. I saved her from—from Ferrari, and I'll save her from you——"

His big mouth quivered and he hid his face in his hands.

Maria motioned Fritz not to speak, and he obeyed.

"Dear Alexander Grigorovitch," she said gently, laying her hand on the Russian's shoulder, which was heaving like that of a weeping child, "the King understands what a devoted friend you are to me. You must go and rest now, will you? Because I want you to come and see me to-morrow morning——"

Tomsk took his hands from his face, and it was wet with tears.

"Yes, I will go," he murmured. "I will go. But you will not," he added in French, "not harm her—Sire?"

The King held out his hands. "No, no, my friend," he answered, also in French. "I promise you that I will not hurt her. And you must, in the English fashion, give me a penny now, because I am going to send you a tie pin, because you took her to Ipniz—because she so highly values your friendship——"

Tomsk dived into a pocket, produced a large, green, silk purse, from which he took a ten-centime piece.

"This is not a penny, but—will it do?" His face was as white as paper, but his eyes shone with child-

like pleasure as the King took the copper and gravely put it into his pocket.

"Good night, Alexander Grigorovitch," said Maria.

He kissed her hand, bowed very low to Fritz, and left them. They were silent until they heard the sound of his feet in the street below.

"Poor little creature," Fritz said, laying his hand on hers.

They leaned over the railing and watched Tomsk's pathetic march homeward.

"He is a wonderful little being, Maria."

"Yes. Sometimes he seems not only absolutely normal, but even much cleverer than other people," she returned hastily. "He plays beautifully, and I study my operas with him. He was, you know——"

"Hush!" he interrupted. "I know all that. Tell me about Ipniz."

She drew back. "No. He told you that, but I did not, and I cannot discuss it."

"Very well. But—on the evening before my marriage I thought about you. You had not answered my letter, and I imagined all sorts of things. I went for a long walk, trying to make up my mind never to think about you again; trying to tire myself so that I could sleep——"

"I know—it was very dusty," she murmured, her eyes nearly closed.

"You saw me, then?"

"Yes." She told him of her visit to Ipniz; of her passing through the castle gates and crossing the moonlit space before the castle; of the tree on which

she had leaned, and of his going past weary and dejected.

"Did you care so much still?" His voice grew suddenly guttural.

"Yes."

"And—now?"

She did not answer for a moment, and then she said, as simply, "Yes."

Leaning forward, he told her his story.

"Listen, Maria. My—queen—is an excellent woman. And our son is a fine child. My people are loyal; my country prosperous. But—Oh! my dear, I am the loneliest man on God's earth. I have never been able to forget you, though I would not—never, as God hears me—would have sought you out. Once I went to England. It was the second spring after my marriage. You may know that my mother died then. Well—one night I went to—St. Anne's Terrace. It was a night much like this, and by a bit of luck the garden door was open. The cedar's shadow was as black as ink, the stocks were smelling very strongly. And—one of the drawing-room windows was open. My dear—I went in. It was two o'clock in the morning, and if I had been caught I should have been imprisoned for burglary! But I lit the gas, and sat down on—on that sofa——"

She bowed her head in silence. "I know."

"I stayed, I should think, for about an hour. And I knew then that never, so long as I lived, could I love another woman but you."

There was a long silence, and the clock struck ten.

When it had finished he went on. "Maria—you love me, too."

"Yes. Oh, yes, I love you!"

He rose and stepped into the room. "Come here." He held out his arms and she went to him without an instant's hesitation.

When he finally released her she was trembling and her face was as white as paper.

"Please go now," she said.

His blazing eyes held hers. "Yes, I will go, beloved," he said, "but to-morrow——"

CHAPTER XIX

BUT he did not come the next morning. Instead he sent a note.

BELOVED:

Tomsk will be coming to you, so join me in the Luxembourg Gardens at ten.

FRITZ.

She was walking up and down a nearly deserted path when he found her, and after shaking hands he led her to where a closed motor was standing.

Without a word she got in and he followed her.

"I have not slept," he began abruptly, "put your arms round me."

As she did so she laughed tremulously. "You use the same old hair wash," she said.

For sheer happiness they both burst out laughing.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To—Heaven."

They lunched at Versailles, and went to Fontainebleau, where they left the car and wandered in the wood as she had wandered so short a time ago with Ferrari.

In their intense happiness they were almost like

children together, reminding each other of silly little jokes, unimportant little doings of long ago.

They walked hand in hand, stopping once in a while for a kiss; content with to-day, forgetful of to-morrow.

"And your voice?" he asked once.

Her face clouded. "It is—not good," she answered shortly. "That is—the voice is all right, but something is wrong. In me, I suppose."

"But you will sing to me to-night?"

"Yes."

When evening had come they drove back to Paris. They were quieter now; his face was very grave, his mouth compressed.

"What is the matter?" she asked once.

"Only that I am a King, and you not my Queen——"

She leaned against his shoulder, happy to feel even his sleeve.

They dined at a little restaurant in the Rue des Augustins; a restaurant full of good bourgeois. They were very silent now, for she was frightened by the intensity of her own feelings and by his brooding silence.

"Let us go." She rose obediently, and arm in arm they walked through the quiet streets to her house. As they went up the dimly lighted staircase he stopped abruptly.

"I cannot go up," he said.

"Why not?"

Seizing her roughly by the arms, he looked into her face.

"You know perfectly well why not. Say good-bye to me and let me go."

She drew a deep breath, and the blood rushed into her face.

"I—cannot say good-bye to you," she answered.

"Nonsense! You must."

"No, Fritz—I am twenty-seven years old. I am a failure in my music. My father is dead——"

"Yes, yes?" he interrupted hoarsely; "what then?"

"I love you. I am yours. I have always been yours. Do what you like with me."

She was a splendid gift, the fine young creature with the radiant, rose-red face, and he loved her. His wife was that appalling thing, an estimable bore. She was dull, narrow, pretentious, but flawless. And it was not amusing, being the King of Sarmania. He looked at Maria, breathing hard.

"My love—I must go back there to-morrow. I shan't hate it so, now that I know you were there."

"Fritz," said Maria Drello slowly, "take me with you."

"Dearest, I cannot. You are so young——"

"Nonsense. I love you. You are my man——"

"But——I am married. I cannot make you my wife."

"No. That doesn't matter——"

Suddenly he caught her to him and kissed her fiercely. "No, it doesn't matter, if you really under-

stand. You are right, you are my woman. I love you. But—*do* you understand?"

"Yes."

In the dusky staircase they stood clinging to each other, their hearts beating like drums.

"There is an old house with a big garden behind the castle. It has an underground passage to the castle. People will know, you know, my dearest love; but they will not dare talk about it except among themselves."

"And—Fritz—there is only one thing. Your wife?"

"She knows I do not love her, dear. And she does not love me."

"On your word of honor?"

"Yes, my word of honor. She has always loved a German cousin of hers, poor soul. Her marriage with me was arranged because of political reasons——"

Maria drew back from him, and said very quietly: "Then I will come."

* * * * * * *

Three hours later Maria Drello was walking up and down the platform at the Gare de Lyon, waiting for the last train to Italy.

Her luggage was registered, her ticket bought. Everything was ready.

The station was as nearly empty as a great station ever is, for few people leave Paris for Italy in May.

Maria was desperately tired, for she had worked hard ever since Fritz left her. She had packed what clothes she wanted, written to her brother what she had done, and given him instructions to come on and

close her flat and get rid of her furniture. She had paid Hortense; she had written a letter to be posted to Tomsk in the morning; she had written to her singing-master, telling him that she had given up all hopes of ever succeeding in opera, and was going away for a while.

She was deeply glad that there were no other people to whom she owed an explanation.

As she paced rapidly up and down the platform there was in her heart something very like a prayer of thanksgiving.

She knew that she could never be happy without Fritz; that she had never, even during the episode of Ferrari, forgotten him; she knew that they loved each other now far more than ever before.

And she felt that, at twenty-seven, a woman as free from blood ties as she had a right to live the life she chose, providing she did nothing ignoble.

"Is the train late, porter?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle; there is a retard of an hour."

Maria frowned. She was impatient to start; to be on her way.

Somebody has said that he who thinks about making a pilgrimage has already begun it.

Maria's pilgrimage was indeed begun.

In going to Ipniz she was wronging no one. If her father had been alive she could not have gone, but he was dead.

She was going by way of Venice—Trieste, in order to avoid suspicion. Fritz had told her just what to do. She would reach Salki, a small town just over

the Bulgarian border, on Tuesday. Then she was to go to the Star Inn, and then he would send a motor car for her on Wednesday afternoon. This motor car would take her to the house in the garden. And on Wednesday evening Fritz would come to her by the underground passage.

"That underground passage," he had added, with a laugh, "is the only romantic thing—except the mountains—in my prosaic, cheese-producing kingdom. It is well that it should be used."

Up and down, up and down she paced, her beautiful face dreamy with happiness.

Half an hour passed, and then a quarter. In fifteen minutes the train would arrive; in half an hour her pilgrimage would be begun twice over.

"Perhaps," she reflected, avoiding a barrow propelled by a half drunken porter, "perhaps we shall have a child!" She smiled out of sheer happiness in her absolutely virginal thought. It was as if a girl of sixteen had thought it. "It will be a boy, and have blue eyes——"

"Miss Drello!"

She turned, and found Tomsk at her side; Tomsk, wrapped in his military cloak, a grotesque, tragic figure.

"Why have you followed me?" she asked angrily. "*Why?*"

His mournful eyes held an expression that even in her deep annoyance gave her pause. She had somewhere seen a picture of the Crucifixion, in which Christ's eyes, in their deep pity, had held the same expression.

"What is it?" she faltered.

His answer was an odd one. "*Quo vadis?*"

"*Quo*——? Where am I going?"

With an effort she assumed a haughty air.

"Does that concern you?"

"Yes. It concerns every one, Maria Drello. It concerns every honest soul alive. You thought you were going to Ipniz—to be the King's mistress——"

She made an impatient gesture.

"It is not a nice phrase," he went on, unmoved; "but it is a worse *thing*. You must not go."

"Nonsense. Please leave me alone. I have left a letter for you—you will get it to-morrow——"

"You must not go."

"But I am going. You—you annoy me, Mr. Tomsk." It was the first unkind word she had ever said to him, and she saw that under it he paled, but did not flinch.

"Of course," he pursued evenly, "you know nothing about God——"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"If you did you would not," he answered, "lower His flag."

She did not answer.

"The King of Sarmania is married. Oh, I know—he does not love his wife now, nor she him. But they are young, they have a child. If they ever learned to love each other they could be very happy. And who are you to dare spoil their chances?"

If he had talked about her own happiness, or Fritz's alone, Maria would not have listened to him. But as it was, she was struck by what he said.

"You," he went on, "are very selfish. I have given you my life, made myself your slave, but—I know you well. You have been selfish always. And now you are going to ruin a triple life."

Maria stared at him. "How—do you mean?"

"I mean his, his wife's, their son's. They stand at the beginning of what will probably be a long life together. They do not love each other, no, but they respect each other and—there is the child. Who are you that you dare put your physical attractions between them?"

She started back, her face suffused with blood.

"Maria Drello," he went on, his voice suddenly soft, "you must not do it. It is time you waked up and thought of some one beside yourself. Come home with me——"

She never knew whether it was his words or his enkindled, commanding face that forced her to obey him.

He had certainly not been eloquent; his ideas were not new. But she said, as she turned very white:

"Alexander Grigorovitch, take me home——"

* * * * * * *

The flat was in absolute darkness, and Tomsk lit the gas and a spirit lamp to make tea. He had not spoken since they had left the station, and Maria was grateful for his silence.

She felt cold and inert, and watched him dully as he found two cups and the tea caddy. At last he spoke:

"While the water boils let us try that new song——"

"Tomsk! How could I sing?"

"Try."

"No."

He opened the piano, clambered to the stool, and turned to her. "My heart," he said, "is worse, Miss Drello. I shall not live long. And before I die I want to hear you sing well."

"I shall never sing well," she returned, "and—Oh, Tomsk, you must not die!"

"I will not be called Tomsk," he growled crossly, opening one of the new songs.

"I beg your pardon, Alexander Grigorovitch——"

"Sing!" he thundered.

He began the accompaniment, and to please him she rose and went to the piano and sang. She sang on and on, her face flushed, her breath uneven with excitement, as he led her from one song to another, from one great aria to one greater still. Then, at last, he stopped. She had, and she knew it, never sung in that way in her life.

"*Now*, then," he said, one hand to his heart, "where is the famous 'lack' in your voice?"

She could not answer. She knew that at last it had come, the thing that she had never been able to find. The quality that was to make her great.

And it had come at the bidding of this poor dwarf.

"Alexander Grigorovitch——" she faltered.

"Hush! I love you, and I have been allowed to help you," he said; "but—I must not be upset, because my heart is bad. It is valvular disease——"

THE END